多妃并怒

怜惜凝眸／文

少重宫斗、升级流、爽文、强国

DUOFEIBINGNU

完结

Information

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What? Xiunan selection?!

Outrageous!

Being a male consort is a delicate art; the key lies in holding the thighs tightly. ┐(╯_╰)┌

[Minor palace intrigue, upgrading, wealth accumulation, and strengthening of the nation.]

Translator Notes:

*** Xiunan are handsome young men who are being considered or evaluated in the selection of male concubines/consorts in the imperial harem in ancient China. These individuals are usually chosen based on their appearance, talents, and other desirable qualities to serve in the imperial palace.**

+Xiunu for the beautiful women.

Novel has 247 chapters (Four volumes)
Volume 1: Male Consort (1-76) Volume 2: Journey to The South in Disguise (77-120) Volume 3: Road To A Powerful Country (121-186)

Volume 4: Emperor's Eternal Heart Knot (187-210) Volume 5: Return To The Modern World (211-247)

I will be ending at volume 1 which is centered on the palace stuff.

Guys, I'll be doing the whole book!!

Updates will be on Mondays and Wednesdays!

MCUS Chapter 1

The Yan family in the imperial capital is a true aristocratic family. According to the Yan family genealogy, it began with Yan Xiangzhi during the reign of Emperor Daoguang and has been passed down to the 21st century. Yan Ge is the second young master of the Yan family.

The term “second” somehow turned into a derogatory term. Although Yan Ge was of noble status as the second young master of the Yan family, he was a nobody within the family. He has an older brother, Yan Weifeng, who was three years older than him, and was a responsible and astute person. He also has a younger brother, Yan Yan, who is only sixteen years old and is lively and cute. No matter how hard Yan Ge tried, he always fell short when compared to the composed Yan Weifeng and the lovable Yan Yan.

Before the age of twenty-two, Yan Ge struggled to become self reliant, he immersed himself in reading books and poetry, as well as building his own business, hoping to gain attention and recognition from his parents. However, after turning twenty-two, he gave up. The repeated feeling of being ignored despite his efforts became too difficult to bear, and living for others was too exhausting.

Later on, he began to think that it wasn’t entirely a bad thing for the Yan family to ignore him and care about the other sons more. He discovered that he actually liked men. He held a glimmer of hope in his heart: with Yan Weifeng and Yan Yan able to carry on the family line, his attraction to men might be more acceptable to his parents, or at least easier to accept than in an ordinary family. However, he was more inclined to believe that if his parents couldn’t accept the fact that he liked men, they would be more willing to sever their parent r-son relationship than to scold or correct him.

He had silently admired that man for three years, never revealing his feelings in front of him because he disdained being a third party. However, last week, he accidentally stumbled upon the man's lover flirting with another man, and they were kissing. He knew his chance had come. He decided to confess to the person he liked as soon as possible, even if he wasn't accepted, at least he would have closure.

"Yan Ge, I asked you to watch TV with me. What are you daydreaming about?" Lu Yanyan pushed the man sitting next to her, who was physically present but mentally absent.

Yan Ge snapped back to reality. Lu Yanyan was introduced to him by his mother. Since he liked men, he had never brought a girlfriend home. His mother, seeing that he hadn't made any moves, wanted to arrange a marriage alliance with the Lu family to solidify the Yan family's position in the imperial capital.

"I truly don't understand how a gentle and lovely young lady like you could enjoy watching these scheming TV dramas."

The TV screen flickered inexplicably, probably due to an unstable signal.

"Don't you think these women are all clever?" Lu Yanyan had an admiring expression on her face. "I particularly admire Concubine Yue. Who is your favorite?"

"I don't like any of them," Yan Ge sipped his coffee. "In my opinion, these women are extremely foolish. Take Concubine Yue, for example. If she doesn't want to compete for favor or attract attention, why did she dance in the imperial garden from the very beginning?"

The screen suddenly flickered again.

"Shut up," Lu Yanyan pouted and playfully punched him, sarcastically saying, "If it were you, you wouldn't necessarily do any better than her. Regardless, she successfully climbed from a small maid to the position of a concubine. That is a gap of seven ranks! I've read plot summaries online, and she eventually becomes the empress."

Yan Ge remained silent, not wanting to argue about such boring matters. Such assumptions were completely unrealistic—he was a mature man.

Yan Yan's cat, Dou Ding, proudly jumped over by the TV and knocked over a cup of water that someone had carelessly left on the TV cabinet. The TV screen went black once again.

"The cat must have bumped into the plug," Lu Yanyan urged, "Go and check it."

Yan Ge stood up and glanced at the cat. He couldn't understand why Yan Yan, a grown man, liked such delicate little animals. The man he liked also had a pet, but it was a majestic Tibetan Mastiff.

He absentmindedly walked towards the TV, but suddenly slipped, losing his balance and falling forward. He desperately reached for the TV cabinet, but still uncontrollably fell forward, banging his forehead hard against the TV screen. After a moment of intense pain, he completely lost consciousness…

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Translator Note: The first chapters are a bit short.

MCUS Chapter 2

“Second Young Master… doctor… yesterday…”

In the midst of his slumber, Yan Ge kept hearing voices of several people incessantly chattering by his ear. It was vexing and it made his head throb with pain. He struggled to wake up from his dream, closing his eyes and rubbing his temple. “If you continue to make noise, my head will explode.”

The room fell silent for a few seconds, then a tender and joyful female voice exclaimed, “Second Young Master, you’re finally awake!”

Immediately, a few more voices chimed in, repeatedly calling out, “Great news! Second Young Master is awake!” Then the footsteps of several individuals hurriedly faded away.

Yan Ge found those voices unfamiliar, but his head still ached severely, so he paid no attention. He laboriously sat up, supporting his head with one hand, and asked, “What happened to me?”

The voice that spoke first replied, “Second Young Master, have you forgotten? You fell into the water and have been ill for several days. The doctors said it might not end well. Fortunately, heaven blessed us, and you’ve finally regained consciousness.”

Yan Ge thought he must have misheard, and he repeated dazedly, “Fell into the water?”

A delicate hand of a young woman reached over to tuck in his blanket.

“Yes.”

Yan Ge became slightly more alert, opening his eyes to see the floral blanket covering him. His eyebrows raised.

Who gave him such a tacky blanket?

He turned his head towards the person speaking and was taken aback. Who was this little girl? Slender eyebrows, round eyes, round face, probably only fifteen or sixteen years old, dressed in ancient maid attire, with two buns on her head resembling ram horns, she tilted her head to look at him with worry and concern.

He surveyed his surroundings, the hanging curtains, the round table with embroidered fabric, the vermilion carved beams, and it completely baffled him: Where was this? He clearly fainted after hitting the television, and even if he didn't wake up at home, it should have been in a hospital. Why was it in this strange place?

"Second Young Master, are you still feeling unwell? Qiu Xi has gone to fetch the medicine." The maid's large eyes were filled with worry.

Yan Ge suddenly remembered a time-travel palace intrigue drama that he watched with Lu Yanyan, and his temples throbbed. It couldn't be true. He couldn't have traveled through time. Time travel wasn't something you can do just because you want to; it's not as simple as bumping into a television.

He attempted to get up but felt weak all over, and it wouldn't be appropriate to ask a fifteen or sixteen-year-old girl to support him, so he gave up and carefully examined the furnishings in the room, becoming increasingly alarmed.

"Second Young Master? What's wrong with you?" The maid approached, feeling at a loss.

Yan Ge glanced at her and waved his hand. The more he said, the more mistakes he would make. Given the current situation, it would be best for him to adapt to the changes. Thanks to watching those few episodes of the protagonist just after he traveled through time, he knew pretending to have

amnesia was the best option. He quickly calmed down, covered his head, and spoke in a pained voice.

“My head hurts terribly, and I can’t remember anything. Why is it like this?”

“What?” The maid’s face turned pale, and she rushed out of the room, calling out urgently, “Doctor! Doctor…”

As the commotion outside subsided, Yan Ge listened intently. He leaped off the bed, his knees almost buckling, and after steadying himself, he went straight for the dressing table.

At first glance in the mirror, he saw a man with ridiculously long hair. He reached out and gave it a firm tug, causing a sharp pain that made him grit his teeth.

The hair was real!

He slumped onto a round stool, hanging his head with a sense of bewilderment. He had truly transmigrated. How could this be? Was the phenomenon of soul transmigration actually real? Did that mean his twenty-first-century self had died? Would that person know of his death? Would they feel even the slightest hint of sorrow or nostalgia over his demise? Why did the transmigration occur at this moment? Even if it was predestined to happen, why not after he had confessed his love to that person? He had loved him for three years.

“Yan Ge! Ge’er!”

A gentle and melodious female voice accompanied by urgent yet gentle footsteps reached Yan Ge’s ears.

This name coincided with his own. He snapped out of his daze and saw an elegant lady wearing a embroidered silk dress swiftly approaching, her face filled with concern.

The lady appeared to be around forty years old, with a dignified and extraordinary appearance. Two other women followed behind her—a young maid of around fifteen or sixteen years old, with a melon seed face, and another woman in her thirties, her hair elegantly pinned up in the style of a married woman.

“My son, why have you gotten up? Quickly lie back on the bed. Don’t worry, the doctor will be here soon.”

Yan Ge couldn’t utter the word “mother” for a moment and followed the lady’s supportive gesture as he sat back on the bed.

“Poor child, what’s bothering you? Qiu Xi said you had a headache and couldn’t remember anything.”

Yan Ge nodded, his brows furrowing with discomfort. He replied, “Whenever I think of things, I get a terrible headache…”

Madam Yan’s expression grew even more anxious as she hurriedly asked, “Do you remember anything about being a xiunan? The xiunan and xiunu selection is just a few days away!”

“What! Xiunan selection?” Yan Ge was so startled that he nearly choked on his own saliva.

“Yes,” Madam Yan looked tense, “This selection carries great importance, and there must not be the slightest mistake. You truly don’t remember anything at all?”

Xiunan selection… xiunan… xiu…

Yan Ge’s world spun before him. Maybe he should just crash into something again! Perhaps another collision would send him back.

He spotted a crimson pillar not far away, lunged towards it, and collided head-on, even the position of impact matching exactly where he had hit the television before.

With a resounding “thud,” his head buzzed, and he weakly fell to the ground in pain, with golden stars dancing before his eyes.

He understood, truly understood. This Yan Ge must have jumped into the water to commit suicide in order to evade the selection.

“Ge’er!” Madam Yan hurried to support him, sternly reprimanding the maid beside her, “Why haven’t you quickly assisted Second Young Master back to the bed?”

MCUS Chapter 3

At that moment, Yan Ge suddenly heard a “ding”, and a resounding male voice spoke unhurriedly, “Congratulations on activating the Male Consort Upgrade System. Please select ‘Yes’ to initiate the program now or ‘No’ for a delayed activation. After 10 seconds, the system will automatically select ‘Yes’.”

Yan Ge’s headache intensified, thinking that the strange voice he heard was a hallucination. Feeling dizzy for a moment, he heard the voice again, “The Male Consort Upgrade System has been officially activated. Main Mission 1: Participate in the Selection. Successful completion of the mission will give you rewards: 5 taels of silver and 1 Transformation Pill. Please select ‘Yes’ to accept the mission or ‘No’ to reject it.”

Yan Ge shuddered. Was it real or not? What was this talk of “automatic selection”? He couldn’t comprehend it. Only then did he notice a screen-like light panel in the void, displaying the content of the voice in familiar Chinese characters.

He blinked, and the screen was still there. He quickly turned his head to look at the others in the room, but they showed no signs of any abnormalities. Yan Ge immediately realized that he was probably the only one who could see the screen. Naturally, he wanted to reject the mission. The thought had barely crossed his mind when the word “No” flickered as if it had been pressed.

“By rejecting the mission, the Yan Family will face great calamity. Are you sure you want to confirm the rejection of the mission?”

Yan Ge fell silent. Although he didn’t understand what this system was all about, he deemed it more credible than incredible. He was now a member

of the Yan Family, could he refuse?

No, he couldn’t. He silently chose “Yes.”

“The mission will now commence. Wishing you success in completing the mission.”

“Ge Er? Ge Er? What’s the matter with you?” Madam Yan looked at him with a mixture of concern and tears in her eyes.

“The doctor is here! The doctor is here!”

Yan Ge watched an elderly man in a gray robe with a long beard come in. He placed a few fingers on his wrist, and he(Yan Ge) frowned slightly. He had truly crossed over, and finding a way back was inevitable, but before that, he needed to make use of his identity as Young Master Yan.

After making up his mind, his heart temporarily settled, contemplating the current situation. Which dynasty had he crossed into? It was certain that this was not any dynasty in Chinese history. He had never heard of any dynasty that selected male consorts. Even Emperor Wu Zetian only kept a few favored men but never conferred them the title of consort.

The doctor finished taking the pulse, adjusted his beard, and said to Madam Yan, “Madam, the young master is not seriously injured. His memory loss is due to the severe fever. His memory cannot be restored through medication. I apologize for my limited knowledge and inability to help. Perhaps one day in the future, the young master’s memory will naturally recover. However, Madam, rest assured that the memory loss will not affect the young master’s future life. As for the swelling on his forehead, with a prescription from me, it will subside within two days.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Madam Yan forced a smile and had a servant escort the doctor out.

Yan Ge leaned weakly against the headboard and coughed softly before saying, “Mother, your son is useless, causing you to worry. Although I have lost my memory, I will still serve you filially in the future.”

Madam Yan sighed with distress and said, “You speak nonsense. Have you forgotten that you are about to participate in the Xiunan Selection?”

Yan Ge froze.

Madam Yan sighed again, saying, “You rest well for now. I will come back to talk to you later.”

Seeing that she was kind and amiable, Yan Ge hurriedly stopped her. “Mother, I’m much better now. Why don’t you tell me about the selection?”

Madam Yan carefully examined his complexion, and seeing that he was indeed not uncomfortable, waved away the attendants, sat back at the bedside, and said, “Your father and your elder brother won’t return until tonight. Mother will talk to you about the Xiunan Selection. Two months ago, the former emperor abdicated, and the crown prince ascended to the throne. The new emperor wants to enrich the harem, so he will select young women and men among the children of officials ranked sixth or higher. It is inevitable for all unmarried men and women between the ages of sixteen and eighteen.”

Yan Ge mocked, “It’s one thing if the emperor favors the male body, but to do it so openly, he truly doesn’t fear the ridicule of the people.”

Madam Yan looked at him strangely and said, “Have you even forgotten about your ‘flower body’?”

“Flower body? What’s that?” Yan Ge quickly asked, a sense of unease welling up within him.

MCUS Chapter 4

Eh, btw guys, it's my first time attempting to translate a novel set in ancient China, be merciful 😂.

Madam Yan paused and said, "Those with a flower body are not much different from ordinary men, except that they are born with a red flower on their chest. Such men must be registered at birth, otherwise it would be a grave offense against the emperor. Since the Kangyun Dynasty over 700 years ago, Flower bodies have always been considered fortunate. Therefore, every emperor has taken four men with flower bodies as concubines, in the hopes of bringing more blessings to the people."

'Only this difference?' Yan Ge felt a hint of doubt, so he discreetly reached between his legs beneath the blanket to confirm that his "treasure" was still there. It was sizeable enough, so he put his mind at ease.

Madam Yan was preoccupied and did not notice his slight movement.

"The emperor dares to allow men into his harem, isn't he afraid of something happening between male and female concubines that would bring him humiliation?" Yan Ge asked, sounding rather perplexed.

Madam Yan covered her mouth with a silk handkerchief, casting him a reproachful glance. She looked around in embarrassment and remained silent.

Yan Ge realized that this was a feudal society and it was not appropriate to discuss such matters with a woman, especially his “mother.” So, he changed the subject. “How many men have flower bodies in the entire country?”

“Only one in every thousand men,” Madam Yan replied.

Yan Ge was truly disappointed. What percentage of the population participated in the selection process? And how many of them were have flower bodies? Judging by these numbers, his chances of being chosen were high.

Madam Yan patted his arm gently and said in a soft voice, “Alright, you’ve had a tiring day. Rest well. Mother will explain everything to you tomorrow.”

Madam Yan had good intentions, so he was unable to refuse. He nodded and watched her leave. He needed some time to process the information he had obtained.

His body was still not fully recovered and felt somewhat weak. He pondered for a while in bed, then drank the medicine brought by the maidservant before falling into a drowsy sleep.

When he woke up, it was already dark outside. Two lanterns were lit in the room, emitting a gentle glow through the beige lampshades.

Neatly folded garments lay by the pillow. Yan Ge shook them out one by one, contemplating how to put them on. As he looked at himself in the bronze mirror, he discovered that this Yan Ge resembled him exactly, only younger, appearing to be around seventeen or eighteen years old. His genes were not bad, and when dressed in ancient attire, he became a graceful and elegant young gentleman.

“Second Young Master, are you awake?” a maidservant outside heard the movement and asked softly through the door.

“Come in.”

The two maidservants slowly entered, carrying washing utensils.

The round-faced maid said, “Second Young Master, I am Chunxi.”

The other little maid said, “I am Qiuxi.”

Yan Ge had seen these maidservants before. They were the ones who came in with Madam Yan. He nodded silently, they were clever maids.

“What time is it? I’m feeling a bit hungry,” Yan Ge asked.

Chunxi replied, “It’s the hour of You. You woke up just in time. The meal in the mansion will be served shortly. Master, Madam, and the eldest young master are all in the dining hall.”

Qiuxi added, “After Master and the eldest young master returned, they came to see you. Seeing you sleep so soundly, they didn’t wake you up.”

“Very well, lead the way.” Yan Ge speculated about his father. However, as a modern person, he was confident in his ability to handle someone from ancient times, so he wasn’t overly worried.

Chunxi and Qiuxi each carried a lantern and led the way in front. Yan Ge followed leisurely, taking the opportunity to appreciate the scenery outside the corridor. The night was pitch black, making it difficult to see clearly, but the surrounding atmosphere exuded an ancient charm, bringing a sense of tranquility and delight.

Passing through an arched gate, Yan Ge caught sight of a horizontal plaque hanging above the main entrance of the dining hall, inscribed with the characters “Dining Hall.” He immediately refocused his wandering thoughts.

Two male servants at the entrance of the dining hall slightly bent their knees and greeted in unison, “Second Young Master.”

Yan Ge gestured with his hand and stepped over the threshold, entering the dining hall.

In the center of the hall, a round table was set, with three individuals seated around it. One of them was Madam Yan, whom he had seen before. The other two were men. The elder one wore a gray cloud-patterned silk robe, appearing to be around forty years old. His demeanor was imposing, and his countenance stern. The younger man was in his early twenties, exuding a charismatic and dignified aura despite his youth.

Yan Ge silently nodded; his big brother was truly a handsome man.

MCUS Chapter 5

“Father, Mother, Elder Brother, you have been waiting for a long time.” Yan Ge was unsure how to perform the etiquette, so he simply wore a smile on his face and greeted each of them.

“Second Brother, how is your health?” Yan Su stood up and approached him, examining him from head to toe before patting his shoulder.

He had a faint sense that his Second Brother had changed. Previously, his Second Brother was willful and ignorant of any decorum. However, now his Second Brother seemed much more sensible, standing tall with an innate air of nobility. Even when he smiled, his eyes sparkled, making him quite endearing.

Yan Ge responded, “Thank you, Elder Brother, for your concern. I am much better now. However, I don’t remember anything.” As he said this, an apologetic expression appeared on his face.

Yan Su was about to speak when their father, who was seated at the head of the table, suddenly slammed his hand on the table and said, “Rebellious child, why haven’t you knelt before me yet!”

Yan Ge was taken aback and asked in surprise, “Father, how have I angered you?” Apart from paying respects to his paternal and maternal grandparents during the New Year, he had never knelt before anyone else. Kneeling was something he absolutely did not want to do.

Master Yan glared at Yan Ge and said in a stern tone, “You dare to talk back? You knew well that the selection of talents is of great importance, yet you jumped into the river to escape the selection. To evade the Xiunan

Selection is to show disloyalty to the Emperor and filial disobedience to your parents!”

Yan Ge raised an eyebrow inwardly, silently lamenting when his father had become such an expert at divining intentions. So, it turned out that this Second Young Master really did jump into the river to avoid the selection.

Before he could speak, both Madam Yan and Yan Su pleaded on his behalf.

Madam Yan poured a cup of hot tea for her husband and said in a gentle voice, “Master, please calm down. Ge’er is still young and doesn’t understand these matters. Let me explain to him patiently. There’s no need to get angry. Please take care of your health.”

“Yes, Father. I can see that Second Brother has realized his mistake. Although he has lost his memory, he has become more sensible. Previously, he never used the term ‘you’ when speaking to you, Father.” Yan Su teasingly glanced at Yan Ge.

*The formal “you”.

Yan Ge quickly and earnestly said, “Father, this time I truly understand my mistake.”

Yan Xiaojing stared at him for a while before snorting, his tone slightly softened, “Sit down.”

Yan Ge complied and took his seat as instructed.

Worried that Yan Ge might be upset, Yan Su said in a gentle voice, “Second Brother, don’t blame Father. The matter of the Xiunan Selection is different from others. Fortunately, it didn’t become known to others. If it were reported to the court, it would be a grave crime deserving execution of the entire family. In the future, you mustn’t be so willful.”

“Elder Brother, I truly understand my mistake!” Yan Ge once again expressed his sincere repentance.

Yan Su smiled slightly and said, “That’s good.”

The bond between the two brothers was deep, and Madam Yan also felt relieved. She turned to the butler standing aside and said, “Serve the food.”

“Yes, Madam,” Butler Yan Fu hurriedly responded.

During the process of waiting for the food to be served, Yan Ge asked Yan Su, “Elder Brother, I still don’t know your name. Could you tell me?”

Yan Su chuckled and replied, “You really have lost your memory completely. My name is Yan Su. And you are Yan Ge. At least you remember that.”

Yan Ge smiled awkwardly and said, “Actually, I don’t remember. I only found out when Mother called me.”

Yan Su did no doubt that the person in front of him was no longer his younger brother. Seeing how obedient and likable he had become, he added, “Father’s given name is Yan Xiaojing, he currently holds the position of Minister of Rites in the court.”

“Why does this name sound so familiar…” Yan Ge muttered to himself, searching his mind for where he had heard this name before.

“What did you say?” Yan Su didn’t catch it clearly.

“It’s nothing,” Yan Ge asked again, “Who is the current Emperor?”

Yan Su glanced at him helplessly and whispered, “The Emperor’s given name is Huangfu Yuchen. But it’s forbidden to mention it in front of outsiders. I will explain the details to you another day.”

“What?!” Yan Ge exclaimed, sitting up straight, his mouth half open and eyes wide open.

He remembered now!

Huangfu Yuchen was the name of the Crown Prince in that time-travel palace intrigue drama “The Empress from the Future” that he reluctantly watched with Lu Yanyan. And Yan Xiaojing appeared in the nineteenth

episode, where he cleverly handled the challenges posed by the envoys from neighboring countries, displaying remarkable abilities. That's why Yan Ge remembered it so clearly.

But at that time, Yan Xiaojing was not yet a Minister.

Lu Yanyan had mentioned it to him that in "The Empress from the Future," Huangfu Yuchen had always been the Crown Prince. In disbelief, he asked further, "What was the given name of the previous Emperor?"

Yan Su replied, "The given name was Huangfu Zhao."

Once again, it matched with "The Empress from the Future." Yan Ge couldn't help but gasp, then furrowed his brow. No, the Yan Xiaojing in front of him looked nothing like the one on TV, and Madam Yan had mentioned that the Emperors had been taking male concubines for over seven hundred years, but male concubines didn't exist in "The Empress from the Future."

Yan Ge couldn't figure out what was going on and had to temporarily hide his doubts deep in his heart. However, the actual truth didn't matter at all. The only fact was that he had indeed traveled through time!

MCUS Chapter 6

Yan Ge decided to go to the place where he jumped into the river first, maybe he could find a way to go back. What Xiunan and xiunu, it was better to leave this place of right and wrong as soon as possible.

However, before he even reached the door with the two maids, an angry voice sounded behind him.

“Where are you going early in the morning?!”

Yan Ge turned around, and saw Yan Xiaojing was standing not far behind him in a red official robe. Butler Yan Fu was accompanying him and sending him out.

“Good morning, Father. Are you going go out? I’m just going out for a stroll.” Yan Ge walked over in a few steps.

Yan Xiaojing frowned and said, “Nonsense! The Xiunan Selection is in two days. You should stay at home and prepare yourself instead of running around all the time.”

Yan Ge felt dissatisfied, but there was nothing he could do. Even if he went out after Yan Xiaojing left, it would be the same.

“Yes.”

Yan Xiaojing glanced at him and instructed Yan Fu, “Yan Fu, accompany the Second Young Master to Madam’s place.”

“Yes, Master.”

Yan Fu walked in front of Yan Ge and made a gesture of invitation.

“Second Young Master, please.”

Yan Ge had no choice but to turn back.

However, he didn’t find an opportunity to go out for two consecutive days. He couldn’t avoid the selection, so he wanted to prepare early. He regretted not understanding the era better. If he had known what was coming, he should have watched that TV series in its entirety, at least gaining a four to five-point understanding of this dynasty.

After having dinner, he pulled Yan Su into the room and closed the door, talking to him for nearly an hour to finally understand the current situation. At the same time, he fully accepted the fact that he had a hundred percent chance of being chosen by the emperor.

The Yan family had been officials for four generations up to Yan Su, and Yan Ge was a true embodiment of “a family background of integrity”, not to mention his own decent appearance. In particular, now that Yan Xiaojing held the position of Minister of Rites, a second-grade official, and Yan Su was a surveillance commissioner, a fifth-grade official, even if the emperor didn’t favor Yan Ge, he would still be chosen for the sake of winning over officials or maintaining the face of his subjects.

However, Yan Ge wasn’t very worried. As a person from the 21st century with open-minded thoughts, he had ways to fail the selection.

The next day was the day to enter the palace. Before dawn, Yan Ge was awakened from his sleep by Chunxi.

Qiuxi stood by the bed, holding a satin brocade robe, looking somewhat embarrassed. Ever since the Second Young Master woke up, he disliked extravagant objects, including clothing. She worried that it would take a lot of persuasion to convince him. So when she saw the Second Young Master calmly accepting the robe, she was a little stunned.

Yan Ge put on the clothes and absentmindedly touched under the pillow. He instinctively picked up the hairpin and tied his hair. It was an art for ancient men to style their hair, but luckily he had already learned it.

After getting ready, he headed to the reception hall. The eastern sky had just revealed a hint of pale light. The shadows of trees and buildings, near and far, appeared more peaceful in the morning light. The early morning breeze carried a slight chill, making the lights in the reception hall emit a warmer glow.

Yan Xiaojing, Madam Yan, and Yan Su had all risen early.

“Father, Mother, Elder Brother.”

“Hmm,” Yan Xiaojing glanced at Yan Ge and nodded in satisfaction. “Please, have a seat.”

“You may leave.” Madam Yan gestured to the servants in the hall.

The servants quietly exited the hall and closed the door, and Yan Ge knew that the three of them had something to say to him.

Madam Yan rarely showed seriousness, “Ge’er, when you enter the palace this time, you must be cautious. If you are not chosen, it’s not a big deal. Our family doesn’t rely on you for a living. But if you are chosen, remember your own safety within the deep palace. Do not forcefully assert yourself in any matters. As your mother, I ask for nothing more than your lifelong health and happiness.”

Yan Ge was moved by her words and reassured her with a smile, “Mother, rest assured, your son understands. If I am not chosen, and neither Father nor Mother blame me, I will be content.”

Yan Xiaojing glared and said, “Nonsense. I have told you before that participating in the selection is inevitable and cannot be avoided.”

Yan Ge felt even more pleased. It turned out that Yan Xiaojing also didn’t advocate for his son to enter the palace as a concubine. With this in mind, he could proceed with his plan more confidently. Immediately, he expressed his guilt, saying, “Your son is ignorant. Only now do I truly understand the depth of Father’s concern.”

Yan Xiaojing’s expression softened, and he said, “It’s good that you understand.”

MCUS Chapter 7

Yan Su waited for his parents to explain before saying, “Second brother, as far as I know, there are more than thirty young men participating in the Xiunan Selection this time, and many of them are outstanding, so you may not be selected. If you are unsuccessful, you can marry freely. ”

“Thank you big brother for your concern,” Yan Ge said solemnly, “In case I am chosen, big brother will do his filial piety to my father and mother for me.” ”

When Yan Xiaojing heard this, he looked at his second son and smiled, and his heart was very relieved. Madam Yan even wiped her tears.

“Naturally.” Yan Su said with a smile.

“Okay, it’s almost time, it’s not good to make people wait for a long time.” Yan Xiaojing said.

The three of them escorted Yan Ge to the gate of the Yan Residence. A mule had already been waiting at the entrance, meticulously groomed and adorned with a celebratory red ribbon around its neck. Standing beside the mule were two officials from the Ministry of Revenue, dressed in grey livery.

Yan Ge could guess the reason for choosing a mule instead of a horse. In the past, in order to please his parents, he had been diligent in his studies and was quite familiar with ancient history. He had come across passages related to the Xiunu selection in the Qing Dynasty. Horses were typically used for military purposes and considered military supplies, so xiunan and xiunu were not qualified to ride horses, hence the substitution with a mule.

“We have seen Master Yan, Madam Yan, Young Master Yan, and Second Young Master Yan,” the two officials respectfully greeted Yan Xiaojing and his family.

“No need for excessive courtesy,” Yan Xiaojing chuckled and said, “You have worked hard. Please take care of my son during his time before entering the palace.”

“It’s our duty, it’s our duty,” the two officials hastened to reply.

Yan Ge climbed onto the mule, bid farewell to Yan Xiaojing, Madam Yan, and Yan Su, and the two officials led the mule towards the direction of the palace. Chunxi and Qiuxi accompanied him, seeing him off at the palace gate.

Yan Ge surveyed the ancient and picturesque buildings lining the streets, finding them rather captivating.

As the daylight grew brighter, the streets were gradually filled with more mule carts, carrying the aspiring concubines who had come from various places to enter the palace on the same day.

As these xiunu were women, they were eligible to ride in mule driven carriages, unlike the xiunan who rode on mules. Compared to them, Yan Ge considered himself fortunate. As the son of a high-ranking official, he did not have to travel a long distance just to let the emperor catch a glimpse, which could potentially be the only opportunity for most. Along the way, many carriage drivers voluntarily made way for Yan Ge and the other two xiunan, leaving him quite puzzled.

One of the officials saw his confusion and quickly explained, “Second Young Master Yan, as a xiunan of noble status, it is only proper for these xiunu to give way to you in the absence of clear rank.”

Yan Ge was annoyed but smiled without saying a word.

The official thought he would get a coin as a reward, so he felt somewhat embarrassed, and refrained from further explanation.

Shops on both sides of the street gradually opened for business, and many people leaned out from their second-floor windows to witness the spectacle of xiunu and xiunan entering the capital. However, nobody dared to openly discuss the matters of the Emperor.

Coming from an illustrious family, Yan Ge was accustomed to being watched by others and felt no discomfort. He repeatedly contemplated his plan in his mind and by the time he snapped out of his thoughts, the mule had already come to a stop. They had arrived at one of the side gates of the palace—the North Gate.

By now, the sun had risen, casting its radiant light from the east onto the magnificent palace, overlooking the vast land below. It was grand and breathtakingly beautiful.

Yan Ge dismounted and surveyed his surroundings. At a glance, he could see a sea of beauties. The xiunu from various places were all dressed in exquisite attire, emanating a fragrant elegance, each with her own unique charm. Even though Yan Ge did not like women, he couldn’t help but be captivated by the beauties before him, feeling overwhelmed by the spectacle. Among this group of xiunu, there were a few scattered xiunan who piqued the curiosity of the women, drawing their sidelong glances.

After admiring the beauties for a while, Yan Ge’s attention shifted to the xiunan. Among them, there were several who possessed remarkable looks and temperament.

Having already resigned himself to the possibility of being unsuccessful, Yan Ge remained composed and leisurely. He smiled, fanning himself with an adorned folding fan, and observed the various expressions of those around him with great interest.

Suddenly, he felt a strong gaze on him, prompting him to turn around in confusion, yet he found nothing amiss. He silently chastised himself for being overly sensitive.

MCUS Chapter 8

After waiting outside the palace for a while, a head eunuch led more than a dozen young eunuchs to the gate of the palace, all dressed in black eunuch uniforms, each with delicate features, even the oldest eunuch was very good-looking.

Yan Ge had seen many kinds of men and women, but it was the first time to be so close to one who looked neither male nor female. He looked over curiously, then averted his gaze with a shudder.

The head eunuch was about thirty-four or thirty five years old, and his eight-figure eyebrows made him look weird. His status was probably relatively high, with an arrogance in his expression. His nostrils were almost facing the sky, and he ordered Xiunu and Xiunan to enter the palace door in turn with a sharp voice, and the servants and maids brought by the Xiunu and Xiunan could only wait outside the palace gate.

Upon entering the palace gates, there was a distinct change in atmosphere, as if entering a different world. The palace was guarded with strictness akin to legends. Every two meters around the courtyard stood guards with long spears, standing upright like wooden stakes, their countenances solemn, their gaze unwavering. Even the eunuchs, when they needed to converse, did so in hushed tones, their words and gestures exuding a sense of caution.

Even the ash-colored floor tiles, meticulously trimmed potted plants, and undisturbed silk banners seemed to carry an air of solemnity. The xiunu and xiunan, who had just been whispering and gossiping, immediately fell silent, their expressions cautious, though if one looked closely, one could still detect a hidden anticipation and excitement in their eyes.

After the xiunu and xiunan were stationed in the inner courtyard, the head eunuch ordered them to divide into two groups and form multiple rows.

Yan Ge discreetly surveyed his surroundings and clicked his tongue in amazement. By his estimation, there were at least a thousand candidates. As the books often mentioned, the emperor's harem consisted of three thousand beauties, and it seemed to be true.

At that moment, a familiar voice resounded in his mind: "Congratulations on successfully completing Mission 1 — participating in the selection. You will receive a reward of five taels of silver and one Transformation Pill."

"Main Mission 2 — obtaining the emperor's permission to 'keep the token.' If the mission is accomplished, a reward of ten taels of silver and two Poison Immunity Pills will be given. Please select 'Yes' to accept the mission or 'No' to refuse."

*'Keep the token' means the Emperor has accepted him as a male concubine (the Emperor selection).

Yan Ge didn't even need to think, he outright refused. Surprisingly, this time he didn't hear any warning from the system, which made him curious but more importantly, relieved. From this, he could deduce that even if he failed getting selected, it wouldn't result in any serious consequences, which was naturally the best outcome.

The head eunuch ascended the steps and spoke in a sharp voice, "This servant surnamed Li is responsible for this selection. This selection is meant to expand His Majesty's harem. All xiunan and xiunu who have been chosen to come here are truly fortunate. However, only those of noble character and descent have the opportunity to enter the harem and gather blessings for the emperor, continuing his lineage. Therefore, please

remember that only those who pass multiple selections will have the chance to be bestowed by the emperor. The preliminary selection will now commence. Xiunu and Xiunan, please enter separate inspection rooms."

After a while, four eunuchs approached the front of the line for xiunan, with one who appeared to be the oldest saying, "Please follow this servant."

Including Yan Ge, there were a total of thirty-two xiunan who followed the eunuchs into a spacious compartment and neatly lined up in five rows according to their instructions. The head eunuch, the eldest among them, slowly walked past them, scrutinizing them from all angles without uttering a word.

Yan Ge witnessed a male candidate slipping a piece of paper into his hand, which was obviously a banknote.

The young head eunuch glanced around to make sure no one noticed and discreetly tucked the banknote into his sleeve.

Yan Ge nearly wanted to clap in delight. The more people bribed, the smaller his chances of being chosen. Soon, the head eunuch arrived in front of him, took a quick glance, and simply moved on, leaving Yan Ge no time to speculate about his thoughts.

After going through the process, six individuals were selected and led away by a young eunuch, their destination was unknown.

The head eunuch said, "Next, all young gentlemen need to undergo a body examination."

"Body examination?" Yan Ge was astonished. Although he was a modern person, he didn't have a penchant for undressing in front of others.

The xiunan standing on his left side smiled slightly and explained to him, "The first stage of the selection is a physical examination. Those with ordinary features, physical defects, poor health, or not being virgins are disqualified. For us men, it's relatively easier, but the selection for the xiunu will be more rigorous. They not only examine their bodies, including

weight, height, measurements, hand and foot length, and virginity, but also assess their needlework skills in the second stage."

The head eunuch glanced at him but didn't reprimand him for speaking out of turn.

Yan Ge expressed his gratitude to the xiunan and secretly lamented. How exactly would they check if the xiunan were still virgins? Was it a physical examination of "that area"? He was relieved that his foresight told him that the talent selection wouldn't be so simple.

As the eunuch called out their names, the young men entered individual small compartments separated by screens. Some were left behind, standing to the side, while others were led outside by the eunuchs. Those who remained displayed a faint sense of joy on their faces, while those who were taken away appeared disappointed.

"Song Ruhao, son of the Song Chaobang, the Grand Tutor to the Crown Prince."

The young man whom Yan Ge had conversed with earlier respectfully nodded to the eunuch and walked to the other side of the screen.

'So, he's the son of the Grand Tutor to the Crown Prince. The Grand Tutor held a high rank, and the probability of his son being chosen was not low.' Yan Ge devoutly prayed in his heart, 'May Song Ruhao be selected, may Song Ruhao be selected…'

After a while, Song Ruhao emerged and stood beside those who had been left behind. Indeed, he had been chosen. When Song Ruhao noticed Yan Ge looking at him, he smiled, seemingly wishing him success.

It wasn't long before it was Yan Ge's turn. He stepped forward with a feigned expression of timidity, appearing nervous and apprehensive. Behind the screen, he heard the eunuch instruct him to undress.

He slowly and deliberately loosened his belt, and suddenly, his abdomen made a slight movement. There was a "poof", and an unpleasant odor filled

the confined space.

The two young eunuchs behind the screen frowned, quickly covering their noses, and glared at him in annoyance.

“I apologize, I sincerely apologize…” Yan Ge wore a distressed expression on his face, but deep inside, he was extremely pleased. It was worth it to have secretly eaten some beans before leaving home. It wasn’t easy to hold in this fart until now.

Coming from a prestigious family with a good upbringing, he had never engaged in such indecent behavior before, but there was no other choice. If he resorted to other methods of deception and was discovered, it would be a crime of deceiving the emperor, and it would certainly implicate the Yan family. This method, although unrefined, was the most appropriate and a one-time solution.

He shamefully said, “Eunuch, I deeply apologize. Yan Ge can no longer show his face to the world. It’s better to have me sent out of the palace.”

One of the young eunuchs, around eighteen or nineteen years old, immediately became furious and exclaimed, “Indeed, he should be sent out __”

However, before he could finish his sentence, another eunuch blocked him and whispered, “It’s not allowed. This young master is the son of the Minister of Rites.”

Yan Ge’s heart skipped a beat.

The irritated eunuch cast a disdainful glance at him and impatiently said, “Alright, Master Yan, please wait over there.”

Yan Ge was dumbfounded. Could he still pass under these circumstances?

“Master Yan, please,” the young eunuch said with patience.

Yan Ge reluctantly moved aside, pondering his next steps. By this point, he was no longer as composed as before.

After the examination of all the candidates, a total of fifteen xiunan remained among the chosen ones.

MCUS Chapter 9

The head eunuch spoke, “Congratulations to all the young masters who have passed the preliminary selection. In the coming month, you will be arranged to learn palace etiquette and rules together. After one month, the selected xiunu and xiunan will be presented to the Emperor in the Qufang Palace. If chosen by the Emperor, you will be conferred with titles of nobility and positions. At that time, you shall enjoy boundless glory and prosperity.”

Yan Ge asked without politeness, “Is the selection process really that simple, sir? No consideration for musical talent, chess, calligraphy, or painting?”

His words instantly offended the other xiunan, who turned their heads and looked at Yan Ge with unfriendly eyes. The second young master of the Yan family had suggested evaluating musical talent, chess, calligraphy, and painting, perhaps because he excelled in those areas. Such a person who loved to show off was undoubtedly difficult to get along with.

The middle-aged eunuch shared the same thought and cast a sidelong glance at Yan Ge. He replied, “No need for that. You young masters are chosen because you are goodlooking. You should be grateful for the Emperor’s favor.”

The xiunan responded in unison, “Thank you for your guidance, sir.”

Yan Ge remained silent, repeatedly thinking two words in his mind: It’s over, it’s over, it’s over…

“Xiao Yongzi, Xiao Shunzi, lead the young masters to their residences.”

“Yes.”

…..

For the past month, Yan Ge believed he still had a chance, but after only two days, he realized a problem: he was still appointed by default! He deliberately performed poorly during the lessons on etiquette but the several teaching aunts only expressed disappointment, without any discontent or reproach. How could such a lecherous Emperor manage the country like this? The corrupt practice of “preselection” should have been rectified long ago!

This path was impassable. Yan Ge could only pin his hopes on the Emperor’s selection. At this point, the only person who could reject him was the Emperor. With this realization, he decided to relax.

After spending some time with the other fourteen xiunan, Yan Ge quickly learned what to do. Song Ruhao told him that the Emperor’s selection was based on three criteria: appearance, the Emperor’s impression, and etiquette. As long as he found a way to displease the Emperor, everything would be fine.

Speaking of Song Ruhao, Yan Ge believed he would certainly be chosen. He liked men who were resolute and handsome, possessing a strong and robust image. However, Song Ruhao and the other xiunan were more delicate and refined, unable to catch his eye at all. That’s why Yan Ge hadn’t paid much attention to Song Ruhao’s appearance initially. Later, he discovered that Song Ruhao was indeed a beautiful man with sword-like brows, refined and cultured, full of talent, and one of the most outstanding among the fifteen xiunan.

Intensive training took place every day, and time passed quickly. The one-month deadline was approaching. It seemed calm among the xiunan during this month. However, even if Yan Ge didn’t pay attention, he heard about several major incidents that occurred among the xiunu. One exceptionally beautiful xiunu had accidentally fallen and disfigured herself, while another talented xiunu carelessly burned her fingers, rendering her unable to play the zither or paint…

On the day of the final selection, more than two hundred xiunu and xiunan lined up outside the Qufang Palace for the Emperor's selection. The Emperor, Empress, and concubines interested in the selection were inside the hall.

In groups of six, the xiunan and xiunu took turns stepping forward to be chosen by the Emperor.

In comparison to the xiunu, the xiunan were given priority and selected first. Due to his background, Yan Ge was assigned to the first group. To prepare for this day, he made sufficient arrangements, wearing ordinary clothes and deliberately using cosmetics to make himself appear less attractive.

Six people entered the grand hall and stood in a row below. Following the teaching aunt's previous teachings, they turned left, turned right, and turned back, allowing the Emperor and others to get a clear view of their faces, profiles, and figures. As he followed the movements with the other five individuals, Yan Ge felt awkward and clumsy, like there was a bug crawling all over his body.

After completing the turns, the eunuch called out the names.

"Song Ruhao, son of the Grand Tutor of the Crown Prince."

Song Ruhao took two steps forward, respectfully knelt down, and bowed to the Emperor and Empress.

"Greetings, Your Majesty and Empress. May His Majesty enjoy boundless peace, and may the Empress receive countless blessings."

After a moment of silence in the hall, a melodious female voice softly laughed, resembling silver pearls rolling on a jade plate. "Your Majesty, the son of the Grand Tutor's family is indeed outstanding and talented."

Under the scrutiny of all eyes, Yan Ge dared not lift his head, so he was unable to identify the speaker but guessed it was the Empress. The Emperor remained silent, and Yan Ge couldn't discern his actions, but he heard the

eunuch announce, “Song Ruhao, keep your token.” This meant he had been chosen by the Emperor.

Song Ruhao expressed his gratitude, stepped back, and left the hall.

The second xiunan approached, but the Emperor and Empress showed no particular reaction. The eunuch then proclaimed, “Liu Weien, leave your token.”

Next was Yan Ge’s turn.

In front of the most esteemed individuals in the realm, Yan Ge’s proud knees finally touched the ground. As he stepped forward, his movements were stiff, and even when he knelt down, he mistakenly started with his right foot. The Huangfu Dynasty was a land of etiquette, and the left side held more significance. Although this mistake was not insignificant, it was not enough to implicate the Yan family, making it just right. This was the ingenious method he had come up with.

Suddenly, a sharp gaze fell upon Yan Ge, seemingly piercing through his body.

Yan Ge’s entire being tensed involuntarily, his reaction genuine. Then his eyebrows twitched as if he had just realized his mistake. His expression changed, and he quickly prostrated, trembling slightly. However, his subsequent reaction was a pretense.

After a long silence from above, the same female voice spoke again, gently saying, “Your Majesty, please calm down. The second son of the Yan family must have been too nervous. He seems like a composed person, and his nervousness has a certain charm.”

Yan Ge furrowed his brows. This woman…

The Emperor still did not speak. After a moment, the eunuch announced, “Yan Ge, keep your token.”

What?!

Yan Ge almost lifted his head to see if the Emperor was blind, but he retained his composure and suppressed his infuriation. He expressed his gratitude, then withdrew from the grand hall.

At this moment, the voice of the system sounded particularly gloating, “Ding. Congratulations on successfully completing Main Mission 2 – Obtaining the Emperor’s permission to ‘keep your token.’ You have been rewarded with 10 taels of silver and 2 Poison Immunity pills. Main mission 3 – Being conferred by the Emperor. If the mission is successful, you will be rewarded with 50 taels of silver and a copy of the book “The Eighteen Arts of Yufu” To accept the mission, please select ‘Yes.’ To refuse the mission, please select ‘No.’”

Damn it!

***Yufu refers to the actions or techniques employed by a wife or consort to maintain harmony, influence, or control over the husband or partner.**

MCUS Chapter 10

Yan Ge firmly chose “No” with determination, and once again, the system did not indicate the consequences of his refusal. Well, at this point, he still didn’t know what exactly this system was all about.

After returning to his room in the temporary residence for the xiunan, Yan Ge paced back and forth, unable to come up with a corresponding plan. Once conferred, he would no longer have the opportunity to leave the palace. What other options were there? What other options?

Just when he felt helpless, a eunuch arrived with a royal decree.

“By the mandate of Heaven, the Emperor’s decree states: Yan Xiaojing’s son, Yan Ge, possesses extraordinary appearance and lively nature. I am greatly pleased, thus conferring him as Yan Daying, bestowing him with Chunfang Courtyard at Chunfeng Palace. This is my blessing.”

Yan Daying…

Yan Ge’s brow twitched, and he knelt down to express his gratitude.

“Yan Ge acknowledges the decree and offers gratitude. Long live our Emperor, for ten thousand years, ten thousand years, and countless more.”

“Ding. Congratulations on successfully completing Main Mission 3 – Being conferred by the Emperor. You have been rewarded with 50 taels of silver and a copy of ‘The Eighteen Arts of Yufu.’”

“Main Mission 4 – Being promoted to Changzai by the Emperor. If the mission is successful, you will be rewarded with 100 taels of silver and a copy of the “Imperial Pharmacopoeia.” To accept the mission, please select ‘Yes.’ To refuse the mission, please select ‘No.’”

***Imperial Pharmacopoeia refers to a collection or compendium of medicinal formulas, remedies, and prescriptions used in traditional Chinese medicine that were specifically compiled for use in the imperial court.**

Yan Ge numbly chose “No.”

The eunuch delivering the decree smiled and said, “Congratulations, Yan Daying. The Ministry of Internal Affairs will soon send two servants to accompany you, a palace maid and a palace eunuch. Barring any unforeseen circumstances, they will be with you at all times. They will escort you to Chunfang Courtyard, and once you arrive there, the Ministry of Internal Affairs will provide you with all necessary daily items, including the attire befitting your status.”

“No need to trouble yourself, Eunuch,” Yan Ge’s lips curved as he took out a few silver coins from his sleeve to reward him.

The eunuch delivering the decree smiled broadly. “Thank you for the gracious reward, Young Master. I shall take my leave.”

“Please take your time, Eunuch.” Yan Ge politely escorted him to the door. Better to deal with the King of Hell than with troublesome little demons. It was better to avoid offending people in this palace.

Not long after the eunuch left, the two servants assigned by the Ministry of Internal Affairs arrived. Yan Ge hadn’t even had a chance to see their faces when they prostrated on the ground.

“The servant Xiao Zhan pays respects to Young Master!”

“The servant Wan Xiang pays respects to Young Master!”

“You may rise.”

“Thank you, Young Master.”

The young palace maid and eunuch stood up, respectfully positioning themselves on either side. The petite palace maid had an ordinary appearance, but her eyes were quite lively. The young eunuch, not much taller than her, had a clean and pure countenance, resembling a delicate youth. Both of them appeared to be around sixteen or seventeen years old.

Commanding such young children made Yan Ge feel a twinge of guilt. He spoke just a few words, “In the future, serve this young master diligently, and I shall never mistreat you.”

The two of them knelt down together, expressing their determination, “Yes, Young Master!”

Yan Ge waved his hand, “Rise, and let us proceed to the Chunfang Courtyard.”

“Yes.”

The three of them walked towards the Chunfeng Palace at a leisurely pace. Xiao Zhan and Wan Xiang provided an introduction to the palace’s situation for Yan Ge in hushed tones. Despite their young age, having spent a considerable amount of time in the palace, they were knowledgeable about various matters.

Chunfang Courtyard was one of the residences for the imperial consorts in the harem, and ever since the first batch of male consorts were granted residence there years ago, it had almost exclusively been assigned to male consorts. The Chunfang Courtyard was a small annex belonging to the Chunfeng Palace.

Upon reaching the Chunfeng Palace, they encountered several palace maids and eunuchs bustling around, engaged in moving various activities. The three other xiunan also resided in the Chunfeng Palace.

Yan Ge instructed Wan Xiang to inquire, and it was revealed that Song Ruhao had been promoted to Song Guiren, holding the rank of third-class

consorts. Du Zhengfeng had become Du Changzai, holding the rank of fifth-class consorts. Zhou Wenhuan and Yan Ge were both conferred as Da Ying, holding the rank of fifth-class consorts as well.

Wan Xiang whispered softly, “Young Master, within His Majesty’s harem, the ranks for the female consorts from lowest to highest are Daying, Changzai, Zhaoyi, Jieyu, Guiren (Consort), Pin, Fei, Guifei (Noble Consort), Huang Guifei(Imperial Noble Consort), to Huanghou (Empress).

“For the male consorts, the ranks range from bottom to top as: Daying, Changzai, Shirén (scholar), Cairen, Guiren, Shiqing, Caiqing (honorable official), Guiqing(Noble Consort), to Huang Guiqing (Imperial Noble Consort).”

“When the xiunan and xiunu first enter the palace, they can only obtain the ranks of Guiren and below. The servants address those below the rank of Guiren as ‘Young Master,’ while those above are referred to as ‘Niangniang’ for the imperial consorts while the male consorts are called by their specific titles. Logically speaking, consorts below Pin do not have the qualifications to reside in the main hall of a palace. However, among the four male consorts, Song Guiren holds the highest rank, which allows him to reside in the main hall of Chunfang Palace.”

Yan Ge casually asked, “When did the two of you enter the palace?”

Wan Xiang and Xiao Zhan both replied, “Three years ago.”

Yan Ge said, “You both have a better understanding of the palace than I do. Remind me whenever necessary.”

“Yes!”

After a moment’s hesitation, Wan Xiang added, “Young Master, it is not permissible to use the term ‘I’ within the palace. If it is overheard by someone with ill intentions, it may be deemed inappropriate.”

Yan Ge paused, nodding in acknowledgment.

Author’s note: Regarding the ranks and grades of consorts, they were determined based on various historical dynasties. My dear readers, there is no need to scrutinize them too much.

MCUS Chapter 11

After tidying up the place, the personnel from the Ministry of Internal Affairs delivered various items. Apart from the basic necessities such as tea sets, silk quilts, and fabrics, there were three sets of promised attire. Additionally, a monthly allowance of two taels of silver was granted. Although two taels of silver may not sound like much, it equated to half a year's expenses for an ordinary household.

Yan Ge had Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi unfold the attire for the Daying to inspect it. Fortunately, it was a standard men's outfit consisting of a long robe and a brocade gown. The fabric was of superior quality compared to ordinary garments, and the tailoring, stitches, and embroidery were more refined.

The hair pins to be used were a distinctive feature. The hairpins had a fan-shaped design, as the character "fan" also means "good," symbolizing understanding and empathy. Regardless of the material, patterns, or colors used, the shape of the hairpins was the same.

The "Daying" had one fan rib in the hairpin, representing a flat surface without folds. The "Changzai" had two fan ribs, and the "Zhaoyi" had three. This pattern continued, indicating a higher status with the increased number of fan ribs.

Meanwhile, the female consorts wore varied floral ornaments. The number of flowers varied to show their ranks, starting from one flower, then two flowers, three flowers, and so on. This also applied to hairpins or other hair accessories. The "Huanghou" was an exception as she could only wear the "phoenix crown."

After changing into the new clothes, Yan Ge instructed Xiao Chuanzi and Wan Xiang, “Let’s go and pay a visit to Song Guiren.”

“Yes.”

The main hall was different from the side courtyard. The entrance to the hall was at least one zhang wide and one zhang and a half high, imposing and majestic. Upon entering the hall, Du Zhengfeng and Zhou Wenhuan were already present.

Song Ruhao was seated in the main position, adorned in a purple brocade robe that accentuated his handsome and captivating appearance. Yan Ge thought to himself that this individual would undoubtedly become a favored individual in the future.

Among the four of them, regardless of looks, family background, or talent, Song Ruhao outshone the others. Zhou Wenhuan was not lacking either, emanating an air of scholarly refinement. Du Zhengfeng, on the other hand, had a distinct air about him, embodying the masculine strength and ruggedness of a man.

Yan Ge’s thoughts momentarily deviated. Could such a “dominant” man be subdued by that lustful emperor? Nevertheless, with the charming Song Guiren, elegant Zhou Wenhao, and cool-headed Du, each possessing their own unique qualities, it could be considered a fortunate situation for him.

As Yan Ge observed Song Ruhao and the others, they, too, were sizing him up. The young man was extremely handsome, which was not particularly surprising. However, his eyes were exceptionally beautiful, as if they were smiling even when he wasn’t, endearing and delightful. Furthermore, his bearing was naturally composed, walking with a calm and leisurely demeanor that exuded an innate nobility and tranquility. It seemed as though no matter the magnitude of the matter at hand, it was of little concern to him.

Yan Ge bowed at a forty-five-degree angle, placing his left palm on top, and stacked his hands near his lower abdomen as he lowered his head. “ Yan Daying greets Song Guiren and pays respects to Du Changzai” This was a

privilege afforded to male consorts, exempting them from the requirement to kneel during greetings, unlike female consorts.

*Song Ruhaos's rank is Guiren while Du Zhengfeng's rank is Changzai.

Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi knelt behind Yan Ge.

Song Ruhao smiled faintly and said, "Brother, please rise and have a seat."

"Thank you, Song Guiren." Yan Ge felt uneasy when he was addressed as "brother." As he made his way to his seat, he exchanged nods of acknowledgment with Zhou Wenhuan, as their ranks were on par.

Du Zhengfeng casually inquired, "Why did Brother Yan arrive so late?"

Zhou Wenhuan chuckled lightly and said, "I remember that Brother Yan previously mentioned his proficiency in the arts of qin, chess, calligraphy, and painting. When I arrived, I heard someone playing the qin, so it must have been Brother Yan."

"Brother" was the self-proclaimed title for male consorts, as they served the monarch as "brothers."

Yan Ge looked at him in surprise. How could he not remember ever claiming to be skilled in the arts of qin, chess, calligraphy, and painting? This person, who played the qin on the very first day of his appointment, seemed to be mocking him for seeking imperial favor so quickly.

While he thought this in his mind, he showed no trace of it on his face and simply smiled, saying, "Zhou Daying, you honor me. But I must confess, Yan Ge is truly lacking in proficiency in the arts of qin, chess, calligraphy, and painting. I am deeply ashamed."

Zhou Wenhuan did not expect him to respond this way and visibly paused.

Song Ruhao smiled and said, "Very well. The fact that the four of us can gather here is a matter of fate. We should strive for harmonious coexistence in the future. If any of you, my younger brothers, have any financial

concerns, do not hesitate to inform this humble consort. Today, everyone is tired, so if there are no other matters, let us disperse and rest."

"Yes, Brother, I take my leave."

Upon returning to Chunfang Courtyard, before even entering the door, Xiao Chuanzi exclaimed indignantly, "Master, that Zhou Daying is truly adept at fabricating stories out of thin air. His status is no higher than yours, so what is there for him to be so smug about?"

Yan Ge smiled at him, his eyes narrowed. "Hmm? Xiao Chuanzi, remember, calamity arises from loose lips."

Xiao Chuanzi quickly fell silent. Although the master was smiling, his gaze didn't seem like he was joking with him.

MCUS Chapter 12

After finishing the evening meal, Yan Ge pondered the crisis within the palace and decided to contemplate the strange upgrade system.

Now that it was already established that he would remain in the palace, he needed to plan for his survival. Perhaps one day this system could truly assist him.

As he thought about the system, a floating panel immediately appeared before him, displaying various options. After examining it for a while, he discovered that this system resembled a gaming system, complete with main missions, side missions, skills, and a backpack, as well as a coin purse. The task bar provided main and side missions, each offering corresponding rewards upon completion.

Learning skills required a certain amount of silver, but he currently lacked the funds to unlock any skills or determine what skills he would acquire. Rewards obtained from completing missions would automatically be stored in the backpack and could be accessed with a double-click. The coin purse held the silver he had acquired.

Yan Ge disregarded the mission prompts in the task bar and noticed two Poison Immunity Pills in his backpack.

He decided to consume one of them for the time being. Since the system had selected him, it was unlikely that it intended to poison him, so he wasn’t concerned about the authenticity of the Poison Immunity Pills. With a click, one pill disappeared from his backpack, and the system notified him that the pill had been absorbed. Yan Ge intentionally paid attention but felt no significant effects, leaving him uncertain about the reliability of the system.

Wan Xiang, by his side, fanned Yan Ge and assumed he was bored. She spoke up, “Master, in my opinion, among the other three consorts, Zhou Daying is probably the most difficult to get along with.”

Yan Ge neither confirmed nor denied it. He was not one to gossip, nor would he engage in idle chatter with a young girl. However, he didn’t mind Wan Xiang gossiping with him. Perhaps there would be useful information hidden within.

Before long, a eunuch arrived at Chunfeng Palace to deliver a message.

The four consorts quickly went to the front court to listen to the decree.

“The Empress has decreed that a grand banquet will be held at the Baihua Palace tomorrow at noon to celebrate the entry of the new consorts. All consorts shall raise their cups in joyous celebration!”

“Thank you for the Empress’s grace!”

After seeing off the eunuch, Yan Ge pondered. The Empress had scheduled the banquet for noon, and it was likely that the Emperor would also attend. However, he wasn’t worried. Among the newly entered consorts, there were many outstanding individuals who would catch the Emperor’s attention before him. Nevertheless, this banquet presented a good opportunity to gather intelligence.

The next day, half an hour before noon, Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi began preparing anxiously.

Yan Ge chose simple attire and a plain headdress. Estimating that it was almost time, he first went to visit Song Ruhao, then the four male consorts departed for the Baihua Palace together.

Since each consort resided in different palaces, they only encountered other consorts near the Baihua Palace. Some consorts were accompanied by only a few servants, while others had a large entourage. Their status determined the number of attendants. When encountering higher-ranked consorts, Yan

Ge meticulously followed protocol, making way and offering proper greetings, striving not to attract attention.

Occasionally, higher-ranked consorts cast disdainful or hostile glances at him, but he pretended not to notice. Today's banquet was hosted by the Empress, and perhaps the Emperor would attend as well. No one dared to cause any unpleasant incidents.

Once the consorts entered the Baihua Palace, they were greeted by the fragrant scent of flowers and the melodies of musical instruments. Guided by the palace maids, they took their seats according to their ranks, with those of higher rank closer to the top seat. The top seat remained unoccupied as they awaited the arrival of the Emperor and Empress.

After a while, the eunuch's chanting came from outside: "The Empress is here—"

All the consorts stood up to greet her.

Moments later, a young woman wearing a phoenix crown and supported by eunuchs entered with a slow and graceful stride. Her golden dress shimmered with the light of emeralds and pearls, and the phoenix on her brocade robe seemed ready to take flight. Her dignified and noble demeanor, befitting the motherly figure of the world, surpassed all others. This woman was the current Empress, Lady Du Mu.

After the Empress took her seat, it was customary for all the consorts to pay their respects together. However, this time, under the eunuch's chant, the consorts followed the order of their ranks, offering their formal salutations to the Empress one by one.

This was to help the consorts to familiarize themselves with one another. Yan Ge silently observed, recording everything.

The Huangfu Dynasty had already witnessed seven generations, allowing for the appointment of one Huang Guifei(Imperial Noble Consort), two Guifei (Noble Consorts), four Fei, six Pin, and an unlimited number of Guiren, Jieyu, and others. However, both the late Emperor and the current

Emperor had not appointed a Huang Guifei or Guifei. The number of male consorts was fixed at four, regardless of their rank.

The Empress maintained a smile as she gestured for everyone to take their seats.

Merely paying respects to the Empress took a quarter of an hour, indicating the abundance of concubines and consorts.

After the formalities, the Empress spoke, “Today is a joyous occasion in the imperial harem. Originally, the Emperor had intended to attend, but he was hindered by important state affairs. However, in the future, all of you sisters and brothers will have the opportunity to meet the Emperor; there is no need to rush.”

Upon hearing this voice, Yan Ge remembered that it was the same voice that had emerged during the Emperor’s selection process—so it belonged to the Empress.

Although the consorts were disappointed, they did not show it and responded with a yes.

Yan Ge discreetly observed the consorts, silently appreciating their beauty. Counting them, there were a total of thirty-four newly entered consorts.

Even if the Emperor changed partners every night, he wouldn’t repeat for a month. Truly, he was blessed with extraordinary beauties.

Not to mention the male consorts, all the female consorts were naturally exquisite. In particular, Tian Jieyu, with her graceful appearance and radiant pair of beautiful eyes, she outshone the rest. She possessed a captivating charm that even surpassed that of the Empress, who also couldn’t help but glance at her several times.

The Empress continued, “Only those who excel in their family background and character can reside in the imperial harem. It is a great fortune for all of you sisters and brothers to be selected among the thousands in the country. However, my focus in governing the harem is on harmony. Only with a

harmonious harem can the Emperor be free from worries and govern the court with peace of mind. I hope all of you sisters and brothers will take good care of yourselves and maintain purity, so that you can bear branches and leaves for the Emperor in the future."

The concubines and consorts stood up and exclaimed together, "We concubines/We servants will remember the teachings of the Empress."

The Empress maintained her dignified smile and nodded, saying, "Very well, Xiao Linzi, begin the banquet."

MCUS Chapter 13

After the grand banquet, the Emperor began his visits to the imperial harem. As Yan Ge had expected, the first consort to be favored was Tian Jieyu. She was officially elevated to the rank of Tian Guiren by the Emperor the next day.

Yan Ge decided not to take any immediate action and planned to spend a few days assessing the situation.

News of the Emperor’s visits to various consorts in the harem circulated from time to time, and generally, the newly favored consorts received a higher status.

It was true that regardless of the era or dynasty, the Emperor was a philanderer. However, perhaps due to the current Emperor’s disinterest in men, there was no activity in the Chunfeng Palace.

According to the gossip from Wan Xiang, both Song Ruhao and Du Zhengfeng had been ridiculed by other consorts during their walks in the Imperial Garden. Among them, Zhou Wenhao’s reaction was the most intense, while Song Ruhao and Du Zhengfeng remained composed compared to Zhou Wenhao.

But Zhou Wenhao and Du Zhengfeng shared one thing in common: they both liked to seek out Song Ruhao. Du Zhengfeng didn’t show any signs of favoritism towards Song Ruhao, but he had invited Yan Ge several times to visit his residence or pay respects to Song Ruhao together, only to be politely declined by Yan Ge. In other words, Du Zhengfeng expressed a desire to get close to Yan Ge, Song Ruhao, and Zhou Wenhao, without focusing on just one person.

The Emperor had no interest in male consorts, much to Yan Ge's delight. And with his low status, he was not qualified to pay respects to the Empress or the Empress.

His daily routine involved paying respects to Song Ruhao and Du Zhengfeng, both of higher rank in the same hall, and the rest of his time was spent in the small garden of the Chunfeng Courtyard. Although this life was monotonous, Yan Ge didn't have to involve himself in the struggles of the harem, which made it relatively easy.

He didn't have to compete with other consorts or feel jealous, enjoying a certain degree of freedom. It was what he had hoped for, and he would make use of this opportunity to accomplish what he could.

The first thing he planned to do was to improve the quality of life. Although feudal society had its advantages, such as less pollution and fresh air, the low quality of life was a fact. One notable issue was the absence of toothpaste and toothbrushes. Even brushing teeth had different levels within the palace hierarchy. Lower-ranking consorts could only rinse their mouths with tea, while higher-ranking ones received clean strips of cloth from the Ministry of Internal Affairs each month, which they used with saltwater to brush their teeth, discarding one after each use.

As for palace maids and eunuchs, they had to make do with willow twigs. Yan Ge rinsed his mouth with tea every day and felt that his teeth had never been clean. This only strengthened his determination to make toothbrushes.

"Xiao Chuanzi, come here," Yan Ge beckoned to Xiao Chuanzi.

"Master," Xiao Chuanzi approached, bowing his head to listen to his command.

Yan Ge inquired, "Is there any way to obtain some pig bristles?"

Xiao Chuanzi blinked, "Ah? Master, why do you need that? It's dirty."

Wan Xiang arched an eyebrow and narrowed her almond-shaped eyes, "Answer the master's question directly. You don't need to worry about

anything else.”

Yan Ge didn’t mind Xiao Chuanzi’s retort, but he couldn’t let him get into the habit of asking questions. So, he didn’t interrupt Wan Xiang, only smiling and sipping his tea leisurely.

Xiao Chuanzi realized his mistake and hastily replied, “Master, if you want pig bristles, you have to find someone from outside the palace. As long as you offer some benefits to the palace personnel responsible for procurement, you can get as much as you want.”

Yan Ge handed him two taels of silver. Two taels of silver were quite substantial. From his understanding, two taels of silver were roughly equivalent to 2000 yuan in modern times, which was not a small amount.

“Arrange for someone to take care of it. As for the quantity, it should be enough to fill a washbasin for washing the face. Is this silver sufficient?” He had a general idea of how to make a toothbrush, but he had never made one before, so there would definitely be some waste of pig bristles.

Xiao Chuanzi replied, “It’s enough. Pig bristles aren’t worth much.”

“If there is any surplus, keep it for yourself,” Yan Ge said while secretly observing Wan Xiang. Fortunately, he didn’t see a trace of jealousy or greed in her eyes. He could feel more at ease if Wan Xiang stayed by his side in the future.

“Thank you for the reward, young master,” Xiao Chuanzi said cheerfully as he took the silver and left. Pig bristles were worthless, and he only needed one or two taels to arrange for someone. There weren’t many expenses in the palace, so he could save the remaining taels for future needs.

“Wan Xiang, let me test your knowledge. Do you know of something with strong adhesion, non-toxic, and doesn’t easily dissolve in water?” Yan Ge didn’t have much understanding of this era, so he could only ask Wan Xiang.

Wan Xiang pondered for a moment and replied, “Is the young master referring to resin?”

It turned out that resin existed in this world, which made things easier. “Yes, find a way to obtain some resin for me. I have a use for it,” he said, handing her two taels of silver. Then he asked, “Just like Xiao Chuanzi, keep any surplus for yourself.”

Wan Xiang nodded happily, “Thank you, young master.” Before she started following the young master, she used to wash clothes in the laundry, often unable to get enough to eat during meal times and never had the opportunity to be rewarded with money.

Ever since she started serving the young master, she not only had enough to eat and wear, but also saved some silver. Such things had only happened in her dreams before. However, she couldn’t help but wonder why the young master wanted things that were seemingly worthless.

MCUS Chapter 14

Wan Xiang returned with a wooden bucket filled with freshly harvested pine resin. Yan Ge carefully tested its stickiness with his fingers and found it satisfactory. However, the scent was unpleasant and would likely require some treatment.

Xiao Chuanzi returned just before lunchtime, carrying a large package. He knelt before Yan Ge and apologized, “Please forgive me, young master. I had the pig bristles thoroughly washed and dried, which caused the delay.”

Yan Ge nodded approvingly, “You are not at fault. You did well.”

Xiao Chuanzi opened the package, revealing clean and spotless pig bristles of both white and black colors. Not a trace of dirt could be seen.

After dinner, Yan Ge led the two of them to start their work. He instructed Wan Xiang to fetch a clean cloth and spread it on the table. The three of them sat by the table, meticulously removing the moldy and stray hairs from the pig bristles. Although Xiao Chuanzi and Wan Xiang hesitated to sit on equal footing with Yan Ge, he insisted they sit only after he gave the command.

As people in ancient times generally had good eyesight, the three of them concentrated on their work for nearly an hour, selecting a large handful of bright white bristles.

“Xiao Chuanzi, find some bamboo pieces about the same length as chopsticks, as many as possible. Wan Xiang, boil a pot of water and inform me when it boils,” Yan Ge instructed. He preferred not to be addressed as “young master” repeatedly, but stricter rules within the palace had their benefits, avoiding giving others an opportunity to exploit him.

“Yes.”

After Wan Xiang brought the boiling water, Yan Ge placed the bamboo steamer used for steaming buns on top of the pot and covered it with the cloth. Then, he spread the selected bristles on the cloth and finally covered the steamer with its lid. Wan Xiang continued to add firewood to the stove. Disinfection of the pig bristles was necessary, and the only option in their current circumstances was to steam them at high temperatures using intense heat.

He cautioned Wan Xiang, “Pay attention to the time. It should steam for half an hour before stopping.”

“Yes, young master. Wan Xiang will remember,” she respectfully replied. “The kitchen is messy. Please rest in your room, young master.”

Yan Ge returned to his room and pondered how to drill holes in the bamboo pieces. Despite its small size, crafting a toothbrush was not easy, and the most challenging part was drilling the holes.

Xiao Chuanzi, panting heavily, entered with a stack of bamboo pieces and noticed Yan Ge lost in thought. He quietly placed the items down.

When Yan Ge snapped out of his thoughts and looked at the bamboo pieces, he silently nodded in approval. Some of the pieces were too wide and needed to be split into thinner sections.

“Master, what troubles you? Perhaps if you share, I can think of a solution,” Xiao Chuanzi didn’t see Wan Xiang, so he guessed that she was still boiling water.

Yan Ge explained the problem to him.

Xiao Chuanzi pondered for a moment and suggested, “If you want to drill holes, you can use the sap of the fibergrass plant.”

“What is fibergrass?” Yan Ge became interested.

Xiao Chuanzi explained, “Fibergrass can dissolve many substances. If you dip a needle into the juice of fibergrass and use it to pierce the bamboo pieces, it should work without any issues.”

“It’s not toxic, is it?” Yan Ge asked, concerned.

Xiao Chuanzi hurriedly replied, “It’s not toxic, but it can burn your hands.”

Relieved, Yan Ge asked, “Can we obtain it?”

Xiao Chuanzi scratched his head awkwardly, “Um…. Although it’s not toxic, it can still harm people. It’s unlikely to be available in the palace.”

Yan Ge reluctantly gave up on the fibergrass juice. He picked up a bamboo piece, used a tea stem to make a few marks, and instructed, “Split the bamboo pieces as narrow and long as I mentioned, and then polish them until smooth. If you succeed in making this item, I will reward both you and Wan Xiang with one.”

Although Xiao Chuanzi didn’t know what the young master was making, he could tell it must be something good from his excitement. He quickly agreed with a smile, saying, “Yes.”

He went out for a while, borrowing a plane from somewhere, and first split the bamboo pieces as Yan Ge had instructed. Then, he meticulously polished them with the plane. He carefully wrapped the wood shavings produced by the plane with paper, so as not to dirty the floor.

Yan Ge used a knife to cut a small piece of bamboo, about half the length of his thumb, and took Wan Xiang’s embroidery needle. He stood the needle upright on the small piece of bamboo and hammered it in with a stone ink slab, one hit at a time.

Xiao Chuanzi stopped him when he heard the sound, saying, “Young master! Be careful with your hand. If you want something done, I can handle hammering.”

Doing so sounded easy, but it was difficult in practice. The bamboo was too hard, and the needle was too thin. Xiao Chuanzi accidentally broke one embroidery needle.

“Use less force,” Yan Ge reminded him.

Xiao Chuanzi nodded, lightly tapping the bamboo piece, leaving only an almost imperceptible mark.

Yan Ge squinted his eyes, contemplating whether there was a more efficient method.

At that moment, a childish voice unexpectedly echoed in his mind, “Master, don’t you plan to continue upgrading? Perhaps there will be better solutions after an upgrade?”

Yan Ge was startled. Was this the voice of the system? But wasn’t the system’s voice supposed to be a deep adult male voice?

The doll like voice sounded again, “It’s me. I was afraid you wouldn’t believe so I disguised my voice. This is my true voice.”

Yan Ge was taken aback, attempting to ask in his mind, “Can you sense my thoughts?” As he considered the possibility, his heart sank. The feeling of being controlled by someone else was not pleasant at all.

The doll like voice immediately responded, “Don’t worry, you are my master. If you die, I will die too.”

Yan Ge temporarily believed it and noticed Xiao Chuanzi looking at him strangely. He put down the bamboo pieces, returned to his seat, and pretended to drink tea as he asked in his mind, “What is this system? Can it be removed?”

The doll like voice said hesitantly, “It’s already bound and cannot be unloaded. Master, you should find a way to climb the ranks quickly. With a higher status, you can have anything you desire.” The words were full of temptation.

Yan Ge asked cautiously, “Why do you keep urging me to climb the ranks?”

The doll replied, “I won’t harm you. Just listen to me.”

Yan Ge neither agreed nor disagreed. He continued to carve bamboo pieces to show his persistence. If the doll didn’t respond, he wouldn’t climb the ranks.

The doll sighed helplessly, “Forget it, I won’t urge you anymore. But I guarantee you will change your mind soon.”

Yan Ge raised the corner of his mouth indifferently. He liked men, but he had no interest in becoming one of the numerous concubines in the emperor’s harem.

MCUS Chapter 15

Unable to drill a hole, Yan Ge had to settle for an alternative approach.

He twisted the pig bristles together, similar to making a calligraphy brush, and then trimmed the bristles with scissors, making it barely functional. Next, he carved a hole on the side of a thin bamboo segment and filled it with pine resin, inserting the end of the twisted bristles into it.

The pine resin had excellent adhesive properties, ensuring the bristles stayed intact. Once the resin dried, a makeshift version of a toothbrush was complete. Though its appearance was lacking, its practicality prevailed. Having succeeded, Yan Ge proceeded to make two more brushes in passing.

The next task was to make toothpaste.

As far as Yan Ge knew, regardless of the type, toothpaste generally consisted of four basic components: a cleanser, an abrasive, a binder, and a flavoring agent. For his makeshift version, he simply needed to mix salt, peppermint, resin powder, and aloe vera into a creamy consistency.

Salt eliminated residue, peppermint acted as an antiseptic, resin powder provided adhesion, and aloe vera reduced inflammation.

“Xiao Chuanzi, go to the Imperial Medical Pavilion and obtain some peppermint and aloe vera. If they refuse, you can spend money to buy them. These two items are harmless, so you should be able to acquire them,” Yan Ge, valuing dental hygiene, handed two silver ingots weighing five taels each to Xiao Chuanzi, ensuring he obtained peppermint and aloe vera.

Fortunately, the Yan family was well-off, as Madam Yan had given him a hundred taels of silver and two hundred taels in silver bills before entering

the palace. Otherwise, the blissful days of brushing teeth with toothpaste would remain only in memories.

“Yes, Young Master,” Xiao Chuanzi pocketed the silver and hurriedly went to the Imperial Medical Pavilion. He was also curious about what Young Master intended to create.

Song Ruhao practiced swordsmanship in the garden, while Du Zhengfeng and Zhou Wenhao watched by his side. Within the palace, carrying weapons was only permitted for palace guards, and the sword they used was a wooden one.

Catching a glimpse of Xiao Chuanzi’s figure, Song Ruhao put away his sword and curiously asked, “Xiao Chuanzi and Wan Xiang have been coming and going these past few days. I wonder what’s happening in Chunfang Garden.”

Du Zhengfeng replied, “I suppose nothing significant. I haven’t heard any unusual commotion.”

Song Ruhao nodded and gestured for them to sit in the pavilion. “Yan Ge seems to have no interest in spending time with us, even when left alone, he doesn’t seem bored.”

Zhou Wenhao snorted lightly. “Yan Ge feels above us. Why would he care about being with us?”

Both Song Ruhao and Du Zhengfeng merely smiled.

Unaware that his seclusion had aroused curiosity among others, Yan Ge immediately started making the toothpaste as soon as Xiao Chuanzi returned with the ingredients.

He crushed the peppermint and aloe vera, ground the dried resin into powder, and mixed it with salt to form a thick, grass-green cream, filling a large bowl.

Yan Ge sniffed it and nodded in satisfaction. The refreshing scent of aloe vera and peppermint, combined with the resin's aroma, was not unpleasant. However, due to limited conditions, its shelf life wouldn't be too long. If he had the chance, he might inquire with the Imperial Medical Pavilion about methods to extend its shelf life.

Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi stood by, watching with amazement, and leaned in to take a sniff. They praised, "Young Master, it smells wonderful. How do we use it?"

"You'll find out soon," Yan Ge wiped his hands with a handkerchief. "Wan Xiang, transfer it into small porcelain bottles."

The wide-mouthed porcelain bottles had been washed and dried in advance. Wan Xiang carefully scooped the cream into them with a spoon, filling all four small bottles and leaving some remaining.

Yan Ge dipped the toothbrush into boiling water to sterilize it, then used a spoon to apply the remaining cream onto the bristles. Taking a teacup, he began brushing his teeth.

Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi stood by, marveling at the revelation. They suddenly understood and were deeply impressed by their master's ingenuity.

The salt in the toothpaste was slightly excessive, resulting in a somewhat salty taste, but the sensation when brushing teeth was pleasant. After Yan Ge finished brushing, he exhaled and took a sniff. There was no trace of any unpleasant odor, only a refreshing fragrance, further enhancing his satisfaction.

He turned to Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi. "These are called toothbrush and toothpaste, used just as I did earlier. Oh, and the spoon is too large, Xiao Chuanzi, make a smaller one out of wood another day."

"Yes, Young Master."

Yan Ge continued, “Have you two memorized the steps for making the toothbrush and toothpaste?”

Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi quickly responded, “Yes, we’ve memorized them.”

Yan Ge handed them the two sets of toothbrushes and toothpaste, saying, “These two sets are given to you as a reward. In the future, if you serve me diligently, you will surely be rewarded.”

Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi received them with delight, promptly kneeling down and expressing their gratitude, “Thank you, Young Master, for your gracious gift! We will serve you wholeheartedly and with utmost dedication.”

“Rise,” Yan Ge reminded them, “Remember to close the containers promptly after opening. The weather is hot, and they may spoil easily. There is no need to be too frugal with their usage. Make more when they are finished.”

“Yes.”

After resolving the issue of toothpaste and toothbrushes, Yan Ge found himself with some free time.

He instructed Wan Xiang to borrow some books from the library to pass the time while he contemplated the possibility of earning money within the palace.

Business was his expertise, and women’s money was the easiest to acquire. Considering the abundance of women in the palace, all skilled and adept at competition, it was a market ripe for exploration. If he could establish a “company” within the palace, perhaps he could leave a mark in the historical records. As he pondered this, a glimmer of amusement flashed in his eyes, though he couldn’t help but find his own thoughts somewhat whimsical.

Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi exchanged glances, puzzled by the weird smile on their master's face.

At that moment, a high-pitched voice came from outside the door.

"Zhao Fei's loyal servant requests an audience with Yan Yading."

Yan Ge set aside the book in his hand and asked Xiao Chuanzi, "Who resides in Zhao Fei's Palace?"

Despite his young age, Xiao Chuanzi was clever and well-informed, "My lord, Tian Guiren resides in Zhao Fei's Palace. Apart from her, there are a few others who would contact you."

Yan Ge commanded, "Let him in."

"Yes."

Xiao Chuanzi led in a eunuch of around seventeen or eighteen years old, known as Xiao Zhongzi, who respectfully knelt on the ground.

"Your servant, Xiao Zhongzi, pays respects to Yan Yading. May good fortune befall Yan Yading."

"Rise," Yan Ge said.

"Thank you," Xiao Zhongzi said after getting up, "Yan Yading, our Lady Tian wishes to see you."

Yan Ge was taken aback. Lady Tian? She was the one recently promoted to Guiren. He couldn't fathom why Lady Tian wanted to see him, but given her higher status, it would be impolite to refuse. He smiled and said, "Since I've been in the palace for some time now, I haven't paid my respects to Lady Tian. Lead the way."

"Yes. Please, Yan Yading."

Yan Ge, accompanied by Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi, followed Xiao Zhongzi as they left Chunfeng Hall.

This scene happened to be witnessed by Song Ruhao and the other two.

Zhou Wenhan was puzzled. “Where is Yan Yading going? That young eunuch seems to be from Lady Tian’s side.”

Du Zhengfeng exclaimed, “How do you know he’s from Lady Tian’s side?”

Zhou Wenhan felt slightly embarrassed. “I happened to see him by chance.” He couldn’t admit that he had conducted preliminary investigations into the prominent figures in the palace in his eagerness to rise through the ranks.

The Imperial palace was truly vast, befitting the residence of the ruler of a nation. It took Yan Ge and Xiao Zhongzi more than twenty minutes to reach the “Zhao Fei’s Palace” entrance.

“Yan Ge, please enter,” Xiao Zhongzi gestured toward the door.

Yan Ge nodded.

Just as Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi were about to follow, they were stopped by Xiao Zhongzi. “Only Yan Yading is requested by the Lady. Please wait outside.”

Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi looked at Yan Ge.

Yan Ge had a bad premonition and gestured for Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi to wait outside while he entered alone.

Upon entering, the first thing he noticed was a strong fragrance of cosmetics. Four palace maids stood with lowered heads on either side. Seated at the head was a beautiful woman dressed in a peach-colored gown, accompanied by a senior palace maid behind her and two other palace maids standing behind. This woman was Tian Guiren.

There were no taboos regarding meetings between male and female consorts. Yan Ge had learned from his readings after entering the palace that men with flower bodies were incapable of having physical desires toward women. Legend had it that the gods had bestowed too many blessings upon flower-men, leading to the revocation of their rights to

produce offspring. Throughout history, flower men either lived lonely lives or formed relationships with other men. It was no wonder that the harem allowed the coexistence of male and female consorts, as there was no concern about the emperor being cuckolded.

Yan Ge recalled the peculiar reaction of his mother when she mentioned his flower-bodied status and regretted not clarifying it at the time. Unfortunately, regrets were now futile.

“Yan Yading offer s Tian Guiren greetings. May good fortune be with you,” Yan Ge said, respectfully greeting Tian Guiren.

Tian Guiren possessed delicate and exquisite features, and her gentle smile was sweet and alluring. Her voice, too, carried a delightful tone. “Yan Ge, please rise. Allow me to offer you a seat and some tea.”

“Thank you, Lady Tian,” Yan Ge expressed his gratitude and silently took a seat, awaiting Tian Guiren’s words.

Tian Guiren studied him for a while and then spoke, “I invited Yan Yading here today because I would like to request your assistance, if you would be willing.”

Yan Ge’s attitude remained neither eager nor indifferent; it was as usual. He smiled and said, “I wonder what Lady Tian requires. I am merely a servant, lacking in merits and abilities. I’m afraid that I may not be of much help.”

Lady Tian responded, “Since that is the case, I shall be forthright. I have heard that Yan Ge possesses a particularly excellent toothbrush and toothpaste, which piqued my interest.”

Yan Ge was momentarily surprised and furrowed his brow. He had instructed Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi not to disclose the matter of toothpaste and toothbrushes, and he himself had never mentioned it to anyone. How did Lady Tian come to know?

“I have never heard of using toothpaste for brushing teeth before. Even the Emperor merely rinses his mouth with tea. In recent days, the Emperor has

been somewhat vexed. I thought it would be delightful to cheer him up by borrowing your toothpaste, easing his worries. May I know your thoughts on this, Yan Ge?”

Yan Ge chuckled inwardly. Lady Tian’s words not only implied that his standards of living surpassed those of the Emperor, which was disrespectful, but also hinted at how deeply she was favored by the Emperor. If he refused to offer the toothpaste and toothbrush, it would not only be disrespectful toward the Emperor but also an act of opposition against her.

Lady Tian had indeed secured the Emperor’s favor for a considerable time, showcasing her intelligence. However, she failed to grasp the fundamental principle of survival in the palace, whether favored or not: one must abide by the virtue of “forbearance.”

Seeing him remain silent for a long time, Lady Tian assumed he was unwilling and her expression turned cold. She spoke in a detached tone, “It seems I have troubled Yan Yading. Alas, tonight, the Emperor will once again wear a troubled expression.”

Yan Ge rose and bowed, “Lady Tian has misunderstood. It is merely unexpected for the toothpaste to gain Lady Tian’s favor, which surprised me. I shall have someone bring the toothbrush and toothpaste, and I will also include the instructions for their production.”

Lady Tian’s face brightened with joy, and her laughter became sweeter. “In that case, I offer my sincere thanks to Yan Yading. I will convey the Emperor’s gratitude. Someone, bring the Tian Shan Green Tea that the Emperor rewarded me with a few days ago and present it to Yan Yading.”

Yan Ge expressed his gratitude and accepted the reward.

Lady Tian said, “It is getting late, and I shall not detain you any further. Qiu Yue, accompany Yan Ge back to Chunfeng Hall.”

“Yes.”

After Yan Ge and the palace maid Qiu Yue left, Lady Tian’s smile became even more radiant as she spoke, “Chunhua, you shall also receive a generous reward.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.” The palace maid behind Lady Tian knelt down with a pleased expression on her face.

MCUS Chapter 16

Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi waited anxiously outside. When they saw Yan Ge coming out, they quickly approached.

“Master.”

Yan Ge gestured for them not to say much and handed the tea leaves to Wan Xiang.

Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi noticed that his expression was off, but with Qiu Yue present, they had to restrain themselves.

The four of them remained silent on the way back to Chunfeng Courtyard.

As they entered the courtyard, Yan Ge noticed Song Ruhao, Du Zhengfeng, and Zhou Wenhan in the pavilion, watching him. He had a sense that things were going awry. He performed a distant bow, bypassed the flower thicket, and entered Chunfang Courtyard with Qiu Yue.

“That palace maid is Tian Guiren’s chief palace maid,” Zhou Wenhan said, both envious and jealous. “Yan Ge has indeed formed a connection with Tian Guiren. She has the Emperor’s favor, so by getting close to her, his rise is only a matter of time. It’s hard to believe that Yan Ge was hiding his true abilities all along.”

Song Ruhao refrained from commenting and pushed away the tea cup that had lost its warmth. “I’m feeling a slight discomfort, so I shall leave for now.”

Zhou Wenhan quickly stopped him. “ Song Guiren, please don’t go just yet. You were once the Emperor’s personal reader and had a close relationship

with him. Wouldn't you want to find a way? Are you willing to let Yan Ge surpass you in the future?"

Song Ruhao smiled faintly. "What are you suggesting, Zhou Daying? The Emperor's power is immeasurable. What can I possibly do?" With that, he departed with his palace maid and eunuch.

Zhou Wenhan watched him walk away with frustration, then glanced at the expressionless Du Zhengfeng, furrowing his brows in anger before leaving as well.

Du Zhengfeng looked at the three cups of cold tea on the table, shaking his head. "Waited until it turned cold and left it undrunk?" He finished his own cup of tea, stood up, and left.

When the toothbrushes and toothpaste were completed, Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi were delighted. They also heard Yan Ge say that it was best to replace the toothbrush every three months, so they had made quite a few during their leisure time. Yan Ge instructed Xiao Chuanzi to bring four toothbrushes and two bottles of toothpaste to Qiu Yue, and he asked Wan Xiang to grind ink.

Xiao Chuanzi and Wan Xiang finally understood Tian Guiren's intention in approaching Yan Ge, and they were greatly surprised.

Yan Ge stood in front of the desk, meticulously writing down the instructions for making the toothbrushes and toothpaste. Once the ink had dried, he handed it to Qiu Yue.

Qiu Yue carefully tucked it into her sleeve pocket and kneeled down in gratitude. "Thank you, master. I shall take my leave."

After she left, Yan Ge walked to the chair and sat down, grasping his waist with a sharp intake of breath.

Xiao Chuanzi hurried over to support him.

Wan Xiang was greatly alarmed. “Master, did Tian Guiren use cruel methods against you?”

Yan Ge neither confirmed nor denied it. He didn’t want to scheme against Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi, but the information could only have leaked from them. For his own good and theirs, he had to teach them a lesson.

Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi exchanged glances and quickly knelt down.

“Master, I swear, I did not leak the information about the toothpaste and toothbrush. If I speak a single lie, may lightning strike me and bring me to a wretched end!”

“Me too!” Wan Xiang’s face was filled with anxiety.

Yan Ge remained unperturbed, still smiling, yet he didn’t allow them to rise. He spoke, “Both of you should carefully consider when and where you mentioned it outside, where others might have overheard.”

Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi lowered their heads, pondering for a long time. Suddenly, Xiao Chuanzi raised his head, a look of shame on his face. He forcefully knocked his head on the ground, making a resounding sound. “I deserve death, I deserve death! When I went to fetch bamboo that day, I muttered a few words to myself. There happened to be a palace maid passing by nearby. Since she was a bit far away, I didn’t pay attention. It’s likely that she overheard my words. Please punish me, master!”

The truth was revealed, and Wan Xiang glared at him with anger in her eyes.

That palace maid was most likely someone by Tian Guiren’s side. Everything now made sense. Yan Ge stared at Xiao Chuanzi for a while before saying, “Punishing you now serves no purpose. Go down and reflect on this.”

Xiao Chuanzi became even more unsettled when he wasn’t punished. He stood up in a dejected manner and, with a feeble expression, withdrew alongside Wan Xiang.

Yan Ge leisurely walked to the window, his hands behind his back, sighing with resignation.

He had underestimated the dangers within the deep palace. Even the creation of a simple toothbrush and toothpaste to improve the quality of life had attracted the attention of someone with ill intentions. What else could happen?

Song Ruhao, Du Zhengfeng, and Zhou Wenhao also concerned Yan Ge. These three individuals couldn't possibly be like him, unwilling to become a consort. If they saw him walking with palace maids from other palaces today, it would surely arouse their suspicion, and he had no idea what would happen next.

The idea of preserving oneself wisely didn't apply within the palace. Not seeking trouble didn't mean trouble wouldn't seek you. Was he only left with finding a powerful support within the palace? Yan Ge crossed his arms behind his back, leaning against the window frame, contemplating this possibility.

In the vast harem, the one with the greatest power was undoubtedly the Empress. But to become the Empress and maintain such a stable position, she certainly wasn't easy to get along with.

The other consorts held respectable positions, but they were still women, and it would be awkward to mix with them.

As for Tian Guiren, she had to be ruled out. If she could threaten him over something as trivial as a toothbrush and toothpaste, tomorrow she might kill him over something else. As for Song Ruhao, Du Zhengfeng, and Zhou Wenhao, they were all men and could be approached more frequently, but the three of them held no significant position within the harem and couldn't be considered "powerful support."

Yan Ge mentally filtered through almost everyone in the harem, yet he gained no insights.

Suddenly, he remembered the system and called out in his mind, "System?"

The childish voice immediately sounded, filled with surprise and excitement. “Master, have you finally changed your mind?”

Yan Ge was speechless. He walked to the table, poured himself a cup of tea, lifted his robes, and sat down. “I’ll ask you, why did you say before that I would definitely change my mind? Do you know something?”

“Why bother asking? The higher you upgrade, the more benefits you receive. So, I believed you would change your mind,” the doll said triumphantly. “Master, have you encountered some trouble?”

Others didn’t know about the system’s existence, and the system couldn’t leak any information. Yan Ge didn’t mind having a chat with it and explained his situation.

The system’s voice suddenly increased by a few decibels. “Master! Who said the Empress holds the greatest power in the harem? It’s the Emperor, the Emperor! The Emperor is the thickest thighs to hold onto.”

Yan Ge chuckled, raising an eyebrow. “So, you’re suggesting that I hug the Emperor’s thighs?” The system hadn’t given up on its idea of climbing ranks.

The childish voice spoke earnestly, “Master, please don’t think that I said that to help you upgrade.”

Yan Ge thought to himself, ‘That’s exactly why you said it.’

“Just think about it. If you could truly make the Emperor your backer, wouldn’t you walk through the harem sideways? Even the Empress wouldn’t be able to do anything to you, and people like Tian Guiren would be insignificant. Master, holding onto the Emperor’s thighs would undoubtedly be beneficial! Please seriously consider my suggestion.”

Yan Ge listened absentmindedly at first, but something suddenly clicked in his mind. The current Emperor did not favor men, so he didn’t necessarily have to hold onto the Emperor’s thigh in the role of a “consort.” There were other ways he could achieve it. Tian Guiren had mentioned offering

toothbrushes and toothpaste to the Emperor. If the toothpaste and toothbrush indeed piqued the Emperor's interest, Yan Ge could use it as a starting point to come up with more brilliant ideas to gain the Emperor's trust. By then, wouldn't he be able to hold onto his thigh?

The more Yan Ge thought about it, the more feasible it seemed, and a confident smile tugged at the corners of his lips. However, there was one point to consider. As the saying goes, "One accompanies a tiger as if it were a tiger." When the Emperor trusted him, he would naturally be at ease in the palace. But if the Emperor's trust waned…

Yan Ge felt he needed to think carefully and cautiously. The system called out to him several times, but he didn't pay attention.

After contemplating all day, he still hadn't made up his mind. The next morning, after having breakfast, he had to go and pay respects to Song Ruhao.

As always, Zhou Wenhao had arrived early and was sitting in his seat, sipping tea. When he saw Yan Ge, a strange smile appeared on his face.

Yan Ge ignored him and walked to the center of the hall, performing the ritual with precision. Even so, it didn't diminish his inherent nobility in the slightest.

"Yan Daying pays respects to Song Guiren. May Song Guiren be blessed."

"No need for formalities, please take a seat."

Yan Ge felt that Song Ruhao's response took a few seconds longer than usual, but he wasn't sure if it was just his imagination.

After sitting down, Zhou Wenhao couldn't wait to ask, "Yan Daying , was the young eunuch who came to find you yesterday from Tian Guiren's side?"

Yan Ge could only nod, maintaining his usual smile. He had anticipated being questioned about this today.

Just as Zhou Wenhao was about to ask again, Du Zhengfeng walked in. Zhou Wenhao had to wait for Du Zhengfeng to pay his respects to Song Ruhao and Yan Ge before speaking again. “Du Changzai, it turns out that the young eunuch from yesterday was indeed from Tian Guiren’s side.”

“Is that so?” Du Zhengfeng sat calmly, holding a teacup and sipping tea, seemingly indifferent. He only glanced at Yan Ge briefly.

Zhou Wenhao was somewhat helpless and had to pursue the question himself. “Yan Daying, may I ask why Tian Guiren sought you out?”

Yan Ge smiled slyly. “Actually, it was just a misunderstanding. Tian Guiren heard from someone that this humble one is proficient in various arts, including qin, chess, calligraphy, and painting. She wanted to borrow a qin score.” He didn’t believe Tian Guiren would reveal the incident of “borrowing flowers to offer Buddha,” so it was safe to make up a story now.

Zhou Wenhao didn’t believe it at all. “What extraordinary piece of qin score requires Yan Daying’s assistance to borrow? Yan Daying, we all know that Tian Guiren has taken an interest In you, and you wouldn’t use that as a means of coercion. Why resort to such excuses?”

“Why would Zhou Daying say such words?” Yan Ge looked at him in surprise, innocence written all over his face as if he didn’t understand why he was being falsely accused. “Everything I’ve said is true. If Zhou Daying doesn’t believe me, you can go ask Tian Guiren.”

Zhou Wenhao was left speechless and drank his tea with a gloomy expression, his head lowered. He was just a mere Daying, and meeting a consort with higher rank wasn’t something that could be easily accomplished.

Song Ruhao cleared his throat and spoke gently to Yan Ge. “Yan Daying, please don’t mind Zhou Daying’s words. In truth, among the male consorts in this palace, there are only the four of us. Zhou Daying naturally wishes to be closer to you. If Yan Daying can truly gain favor through Tian Guiren, the three of us will only offer our blessings. Du Changzai, Zhou Daying, can you confirm what I’ve said?”

Du Zhengfeng replied, “Certainly.”

Zhou Wenhao also casually nodded.

Yan Ge smiled but remained silent. Song Ruhao had allowed Zhou Wenhao to interrogate him for a while, so he was not a simple character. It seemed that he truly needed to make a decision soon. Waiting until the crisis struck would be too late to respond.

MCUS Chapter 17

Whether it was related to the emperor or not, his survival within the palace was in jeopardy. So why not take a gamble? Embracing anyone's thigh is the same, so it's better to embrace the thickest one.

Yan Ge finally made up his mind: to embrace the emperor's thigh. However, the problem was that you can't embrace a thigh just because you want to. How can you embrace it when you can't even see the emperor's face?

"System."

The doll's voice came quickly, "Master, you called me. Have you finally changed your mind?"

"Don't you find it tiresome to say the same thing every time?" Yan Ge quipped.

"I exhaust myself for my master, so I'm not tired!"

Yan Ge could almost imagine a little doll patting its chest, which made him laugh. "Do you have a name? It's not appropriate to just call you 'system' all the time."

"No," the doll suggested, "Master, why don't you give me a name?"

"Alright," Yan Ge pondered, "Let's use my surname. You'll be called Yan Jin, and your nickname will be Xiao Jin. How does that sound?"

"Okay," the system cheerfully replied, "I like this name."

Yan Ge brought up the main issue, “Xiao Jin, tell me, what rewards can I obtain besides silver when I level up?”

Yan Jin asked excitedly, “Master, are you planning to level up?”

Yan Ge shrugged, his eyes curving, “Only if the rewards are worth it.”

Yan Jin spoke seriously, “Master, due to certain reasons that are not detrimental to you, I currently can’t tell you what the rewards will be in the future. I can only mention the rewards for the next level after you complete each mission. But I can assure you that the higher the level, the greater the value of the rewards. Trust me, you won’t regret it.”

“You said ‘currently,’ meaning you’ll tell me in the future?” Yan Ge wasn’t too disappointed. The system hadn’t been particularly forthright since their first conversation.

“Yes,” Yan Jin’s tone was earnest.

Yan Ge pondered for a moment and said casually, “Alright then. Let’s try leveling up.”

Yan Jin immediately became happy and asked eagerly, “Master, how do you plan to embrace the Emperor’s thigh? Right now, you have one Transformation Pill, one Poison Immunity Pill, and the book ‘The Eighteen Arts of Yufu.’ The Transformation Pill and Immunity Pill aren’t needed for the time being, but ‘The Eighteen Arts of Yufu contains several methods to capture the Emperor’s heart and mind.”

Yan Ge had a vein popping on his forehead but let out a long sigh and said, “Then bring it out and let me see.”

The next second, a book appeared in his hand. The cover had an ancient style with the words “The Eighteen Arts of Yufu” written vertically, and the characters “Yufu” were particularly large and bold.

Yan Ge flipped the first page open. The calligraphy was in a cursive style and somewhat difficult to decipher, but luckily, he had studied calligraphy

before and was familiar with cursive script:

“The First Technique, Culinary Arts. To capture someone’s heart, one must first capture their stomach.”

There were detailed explanations following this sentence, spanning nearly a thousand characters, and it concluded with hundreds of recipes.

Yan Ge was speechless as he flipped through several pages until the Second Technique.

—The Art of Gentleness. Being gentle is paramount. By being gentle, even the hardest steel can be made pliable. There were four or five fascinating examples following it.

—The Third Technique, Music. There was a musical score provided.

—The Fourth Technique…

Until the Eighteenth Technique, Seduction. To conquer someone’s heart, one can also start by conquering their body. Attached was a prescription of the best aphrodisiac, which has a long-lasting effect and does not harm the body.

Yan Ge clicked his tongue and put the book back in the system storage, feeling that the system was unreliable. It seemed that he had to rely on himself. As a modern person, he had many advantages. He needed to think about how to use them specifically.

He stood up and Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi, who were waiting outside the door, bowed respectfully.

“Let’s go out for a walk.”

“Yes!” Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi almost burst into tears of joy.

In the past few days, Yan Ge had intentionally kept his distance from them. He spoke no more than three sentences a day and didn’t ask for their help unless necessary. He even went for walks in the small courtyard without

allowing them to accompany him. Both of them were cautious, fearing that Yan Ge might become angry and send them back to their original place.

Where would they find such a good master then? Now that Yan Ge allowed them to follow him again, they knew that the master had forgiven them, so they quickly caught up.

Yan Ge estimated that they had truly understood, so he gave them a few more reminders. “There’s no need to be so restrained. Just remember one thing: If this young master is good, then you should be good as well.”

“Yes, we understand, master,” Xiao Chuanzi and Wan Xiang said in unison.

As Yan Ge walked out, he smiled and said, “Wan Xiang, Xiao Chuanzi, you’ve caused trouble for each other this time. Xiao Chuanzi, you should find some time to apologize to Wan Xiang.”

Xiao Chuanzi smiled, “I understand, master. I will definitely find time to apologize.”

Wan Xiang asked, “Master, where are we going?”

“To the Imperial Garden,” Yan Ge said with a hint of helplessness in his eyes. It was said that the Imperial Garden was the most likely place to encounter the emperor. At least he had to give it a try.

The Imperial Garden was located to the east of the Spring Breeze Palace, quite a distance away. It took them nearly half an hour to get there. Before they reached the garden gate, three people came out from another alley: Song Ruhao, Du Zhengfeng, and Zhou Wenhann.

Yan Ge was somewhat surprised but didn’t stop his steps. The calm and composed atmosphere made Song Ruhao and the others momentarily stunned. They could only wait for him to approach them unhurriedly and watch him bow.

Zhou Wenhann’s gaze fell on Yan Ge, a hint of sarcasm appeared in his eyes, mocking him for finally being unable to resist.

Song Ruhao quickly regained his composure and smiled. “How could Brother Yan bear to go out today? It seems like you don’t enjoy going out much, so we didn’t invite you along.”

Du Zhengfeng added, “Indeed, it’s rare.”

Yan Ge said, “The weather is nice today, so I thought I’d take a casual walk.”

Song Ruhao said, “Since we’ve encountered each other, let’s go together then.”

Zhou Wenhann chuckled softly, “Song Guiren, I’m afraid Brother Yan may have prior arrangements and it would be inconvenient for him to accompany us.”

“Song Guiren, please,” Yan Ge smiled and glanced at Zhou Wenhann, disregarding his rudeness. He raised his right hand and made a graceful gesture, inviting Song Ruhao to go ahead.

This gesture exuded an air of elegance, and Song Ruhao was momentarily taken aback. He took a step forward and couldn’t help but feel puzzled. He had seen Yan Ge twice before, but when did he become so composed?

The four male consorts walked ahead, while the palace maids and eunuchs followed a few steps behind, aware of their positions.

A rich floral fragrance wafted through the Imperial Garden, and the sound of trickling water could be faintly heard, gentle and pleasant. The birds sang from time to time in the grove, as if in joyous celebration. The melodious sound of a qin floated in the air, but it was uncertain which consort was expressing her emotions through its strings.

Upon entering the garden gate, a fragrant breeze greeted them, and the scent of fresh green leaves refreshed their hearts. Yan Ge was in a cheerful mood, silently understanding why both the emperor and the consorts enjoyed strolling here when they had free time. It truly was a delightful place. Looking around, there were flower beds, artificial hills, lotus ponds,

covered walkways, pavilions, and towers, all arranged in an enchanting manner, creating a harmonious and picturesque scene.

The group followed a winding cobblestone path through the secluded woods. Suddenly, they came to a serene lake. Willow branches gracefully swayed by the lakeside, reflecting the water's emerald hue. Floating willow catkins danced like snowflakes in the air.

Zhou Wenhan's poetic spirit soared as he exclaimed, "The grass and trees know that spring will not last long, competing in a myriad of red and purple hues. Willow catkins and elm pods lack poetic thoughts, only causing a snow-like flurry."

Song Ruhao clapped his hands and praised, "Excellent poem! Brother Zhou is truly talented."

Yan Ge also joined in with a couple of compliments, "Indeed, a remarkable poem."

"Song Guiren and Brother Yan have praised me too much," Zhou Wenhann's face was filled with a smile, showing satisfaction. However, when he turned to see Du Zhengfeng's indifferent expression, his smile faded. Du Zhengfeng was too rigid, and Zhou Wenhann didn't think the emperor would take a liking to him. Thus, he had never regarded Du Zhengfeng as a threat. With this thought in mind, he quickly regained his composure and discreetly looked around, hoping to be the first to spot the emperor's presence.

After walking a few steps, they noticed a pavilion not far away, where a concubine was playing the qin, surrounded by two rows of palace maids. The concubine caught sight of them, and gave them a faint smile tinged with mockery, and continued playing.

The four of them had no choice but to avoid the pavilion and turn in another direction. Unexpectedly, as they passed by a flowerbed, they encountered two elegantly dressed concubines holding exquisite flower baskets, carefully pruning flowers. Their postures, grace, and smiles were perfect from every angle. The beauties smiled and laughed with each other, looking

picturesque and they didn’t feel like disturbing them. Helpless, the four of them changed their direction once again, only to come across another concubine who was feeding the fish by the pond, her gauzy robes and ribbons fluttering in the breeze, her shadow dancing on the water, playfully mingling with the fish.

Yan Ge was speechless. Obviously, he wasn’t the only one who believed that the Imperial Garden offered the highest likelihood of encountering the emperor.

“Song Guiren, Daying wishes to take a stroll in that direction,” Yan Ge observed that Song Ruhao and the others had no intention of leaving, so he casually pointed towards a certain path.

Song Ruhao nodded, and Yan Ge led Wan Xiang and Xiaochanzi to depart through a secluded pathway, making an effort to avoid encountering others.

“Master, are you leaving so soon?” Wan Xiang asked, puzzled.

Yan Ge casually plucked a willow twig and played with it in his hand. “The fragrance of powder here is even more intense than that of flowers. Why linger in this place?”

Wan Xiang offered reassurance, saying, “Master, please don’t be disheartened. Male consorts have always been a symbol of fortune, and His Majesty will surely summon you one day.”

Yan Ge smiled without speaking, actually engaging in conversation with Yan Jin.

“Yan Jin, the plan for the Imperial Garden was a complete failure.”

Yan Jin advised, “Master, I believe you should consider trying the ‘The Eighteen Arts of Yufu.’”

Yan Ge spoke leisurely, “How can you be so dull? He is an emperor, not a ‘husband.’ The ‘Eighteen Arts of Yufu’ are utterly irrelevant, as I cannot

even catch a glimpse of the Emperor. May I inquire if I can lodge a complaint with your superiors?”

Yan Jin was at a loss for words. “Um… Well, what is the master’s next step?”

Yan Ge confidently stated, “Just wait. Since we can’t make a move within the palace, we’ll start from outside.”

“Has Master already come up with a plan?” Yan Jin asked eagerly.

“Indeed,” Yan Ge replied, his hands clasped behind his back. He leisurely admired the beautiful scenery along the road, with a relaxed and contented gait that left others envious.

“Your Majesty, is that also one of your consorts?”

Behind a cluster of green trees stood two men. The one speaking was a man dressed in black robes, about twenty-five or twenty-six years old. He had a mischievous smile, handsome features, and in his right hand, he played a transverse flute with a playful gaze, watching Yan Ge’s receding figure.

The other man was tall and robust, with a straight and slender physique. He wore a yellow imperial robe and a golden crown on his head. His ink-black hair reached his shoulders, and his well-sculpted facial features exhibited majesty. His deep, dark eyes burned like torches, his nose was tall and straight, and his perfectly shaped lips exuded an air of Indifference. Upon hearing the words of the man in black, he uttered calmly, “A man.”

The man in black chuckled and didn’t dare say anything more.

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After returning to his residence, Yan Ge sat down at the desk and rolled up his sleeves, revealing his fair arms. “Xiao Chuanzi, grind the ink.”

“Understood.”

Both Xiao Chuanzi and Wan Xiang lowered their heads, avoiding to look at his hands. After all, Yan Ge was the emperor’s concubine, and certain taboos had to be observed.

Once the ink was ground, Yan Ge pressed the paperweight on the smooth white paper and dipped the brush in the ink. “Yan Jin, help me recite the recipes from ‘The Eighteen Arts of Yufu,’ while I write.”

“Alright.” Yan Jin’s voice sounded childish as it began to recite, “Jade Shrimp Rings: marinate fish with salt and pepper, add half a lemon, butter…”

Xiao Chuanzi, who recognized a few characters, curiously asked, “Jade Shrimp Rings, Pearl Bamboo Shoots with Dried Shrimp, Longevity Character Duck Soup… Master, are you writing down recipes?”

Yan Ge continued writing absentmindedly, “Yes. The economic situation is a bit tight on my mother’s side of the family, so I plan to write some recipes for them to open a restaurant.”

“I see.” Xiao Chuanzi understood. After all, having seen so much in the palace, she knew that the young master intended to help his family with their business. However, due to the court’s regulations prohibiting officials from engaging in business, most officials would put their businesses under their wives’ names to circumvent the law. It was a case of “finding a way around the rules.”

After filling a sheet of paper, Wan Xiang carefully placed it on the couch to let it dry.

Yan Ge's brush moved swiftly, transcribing thousands of characters, not only copying some recipes from "The Eighteen Arts of Yufu," but also recalling the methods of dishes and snacks he had eaten in modern times, writing them all down. Then, he took another sheet of paper and gave the restaurant a resounding name, "Liu Xianju," leaving a few words hinting that it was a gift for his mother. Yan Xiaojing and Yan Su would understand immediately.

After some contemplation, he also wrote down modern concepts of decoration, promotion, management, and sales in simple language, trying to be concise. Even if the brushstrokes were small, they took up space, and when all the pages were bound together, it formed a thin book. Yan Ge decided that if he had the chance, he would invent a fountain pen or a ballpoint pen.

"Is there a way to send these things out?" he asked.

Wan Xiang replied, "It's possible, but carrying such a large item out might be difficult to conceal. In order to prevent people from stealing things from the palace and selling them, the palace residents are searched when they leave."

Yan Ge interlocked his fingers, tapping his fingertips lightly on his hand. "Ding. Side mission – Please ask Zhou Wenhan for help in delivering the recipes out of the palace. Mission time: within three days. Reward: 50 taels of silver and a silver box. Punishment for failure: deduction of 50 taels of silver. To accept the mission, choose 'Yes.' To refuse, choose 'No.'"

Yan Ge was taken aback and asked in his mind, "Yan Jin, what is this about? Do you know about my experiences in reality?"

Yan Jin replied, "I don't know. Master, side missions are randomly triggered and not subject to my control. However, Master, I suggest you accept the side missions because the rewards might come in handy in the future."

Yan Ge hesitated only briefly before accepting. He calculated that the system had rewarded him a total of 65 taels of silver, so even if the mission failed, it would cover the penalty. Besides, he was also curious about the silver box.

But what puzzled him was why the system wanted him to seek Zhou Wenhan's help. Among the other three male concubines, Zhou Wenhan was the one who least favored him. He didn't have much hope for success, but there was no harm in trying.

Based on his understanding of Zhou Wenhan during this period, Zhou Wenhan boasted of being proficient in music, chess, calligraphy, and painting. In that case…

He picked up a pen and quickly wrote something on a sheet of paper, instructing Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi, "Let's go and visit Zhou Wenhan. Xiao Chuanzi, carry this along."

In Chunlu Pavilion, Zhou Wenhan sat restlessly on the couch, contemplating how he could meet the emperor. Suddenly, his little eunuch, Xiao Linzi, announced that Yan Ge had come to visit. Zhou Wenhan sat up abruptly, almost falling off the couch, and it was his palace maid Xinger, who caught him just in time.

"Yan Ge? He has never visited my Chunlu Pavilion before. I want to see what he wants. Invite him in."

"Yes."

After Yan Ge entered, Zhou Wenhan sat by the table, sipping tea without getting up, and smiled, "Yan Daying, what brings you here? Please have a seat. Xinger, pour some tea."

Yan Ge sat down, "Zhou Daying, it's fate that we stay within the same Palace. Within this palace, our first adversaries are not each other, but rather the 'outside' world…" he gestured towards the grand doors of Chunlu Pavilion, "What are your thoughts on this, Zhou Daying?"

Zhou Wenhan sipped his tea and remained silent, waiting for Yan Ge to continue.

Yan Ge proceeded, “I came here to present Zhou Daying with a gift that may help fulfill his dreams.”

“Oh?” Zhou Wenhan became intrigued but remained cautious. Could Yan Ge truly be so kind as to offer him a gift?

Yan Ge generously produced a sheet of paper containing a long-lost musical score. To assure Zhou Wenhan that there was no poison on the paper, he unfolded it deliberately, using his palm to smooth it out. “This is an ancient and forgotten musical score that I stumbled upon. Zhou Wenhan possesses exceptional talent, and if you were to perform this composition, it would undoubtedly astound everyone. Why should we worry about the Emperor not summoning you?”

Zhou Wenhan struggled to maintain his composure, yet his face couldn’t hide his excitement. He subconsciously leaned forward, his eyes glancing at the paper. “May I have a look first, if you please?”

Yan Ge smiled and said nothing, folding the paper and revealing only the first half of the musical score.

Zhou Wenhan immediately leaned in, the more he looked, the brighter the joy on his face became. After he returned to his seat and composed himself, he asked, “Yan Daying must have a request, right?”

“Zhou Daying is truly smart,” Yan Ge replied. He took a package from Xiao Chuanzi’s hand and signaled for him and Wan Xiang to leave.

Seeing this, Zhou Wenhan felt a puzzled, but he also allowed Xiao Linzi and Xing’er to leave.

Yan Ge opened the package and flipped through a few pages of the book inside, saying, “When idle hands find their way, they become a treasure palace. This collection of recipes was born from my boredom. I wish to send it to my parents, that they may establish a restaurant in the capital and

provide some financial support for our household. As you and I both know, with our humble positions, gaining an audience with the Emperor requires careful arrangements and significant expenses. I wonder if Zhou Wenhan would be willing to assist me in this small favor?”

He deliberately spoke half-truths, straightforwardly explaining the need to spend money to secure a path to meet the Emperor, ensuring that Zhou Wenhan would not suspect his intentions.

As expected, Zhou Wenhan looked at him with a gaze that said, “I knew you also wanted to see the Emperor, even if you didn’t admit it before,” laced with a hint of mockery, and then nodded. “You’ve come to the right person if you need help. The disciple of the eunuch in charge of procurement in the palace is a distant cousin of mine. He will still require my assistance in the palace. Moreover, the contents of your book are merely recipes, so taking them out of the palace should not be a problem.”

Yan Ge smiled and clasped his hands together. “In that case, I am grateful to Zhou Daying. I will give you half of the musical score now, and once you have delivered the items, I will give you the other half. What do you think?”

Zhou Wenhan was eager to know the complete content of the musical score, so he was somewhat disappointed, but could only agree. “Very well. The palace makes daily purchases, so by tomorrow noon, Yan Daying should await good news.”

“Good,” Yan Ge stood up, bowing once again. “In that case, I wish Zhou Daying success in achieving his desires. To avoid trouble, it would be best not to let anyone else know about the recipe book.”

Zhou Wenhan lifted his teacup. “Rest assured. I understand, Yan Daying.”

Yan Ge said no more, leaving with Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi.

Du Zhengfeng approached from the other side of the cobblestone path, and when he saw him coming out of Chunlu Pavilion, he raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“Greetings, Du Changzai.”

“No need for formalities,” Du Zhengfeng replied. “Is this the first time Yan Daying has visited Zhou Daying?”

Yan Ge smiled, seemingly unconcerned about Du Zhengfeng’s probing. “Du Changzai, are you and Zhou Daying quite close? To know such details.”

Du Zhengfeng glanced at him. “Changzai and Song Guiren are aware of this. If Yan Daying has the time, you’re welcome to visit me as well.”

“If I have the time, I will certainly trouble you,” Yan Ge replied.

As they walked further away, Yan Ge could still sense Du Zhengfeng’s gaze upon him. He inwardly wondered and turned his head, but Du Zhengfeng was nowhere to be seen. He found it amusing how suspicious he had become.

The following day, before it was time for lunch, Yan Ge heard a notification in his mind: “Ding. Congratulations on successfully completing the side mission – ‘Please ask Zhou Wenhan for help in delivering the recipes out of the palace.’ Mission completed successfully, reward: 50 taels of silver and a silver chest. Would you like to open the silver chest now?”

Yan Ge mentally selected “Yes,” and the silver chest opened. With the words “Congratulations, you have obtained the complete manual for the Flowing Sand Divine Sword technique,” a flash of silver light occurred as something was added to his system backpack.

Yan Ge felt a surge of joy. A sword technique manual? Could he become a legendary martial arts master?

He quickly opened the backpack, finding an item labeled “Flowing Sand Divine Sword Technique.” Upon clicking it, a dynamic light image appeared before him. A young man dressed in ancient garb wielded a sword, performing intricate and ever-changing moves, as fluid as flowing water.

The first movement was slow, the second, fast. Even though it was a mere illusion, Yan Ge could sense a strong murderous intent. After nearly twenty minutes, the young hero finished demonstrating the entire set of sword techniques, standing still in silence.

After clicking once again, the scene started to repeat. Yan Ge used a brush as a sword and began to learn along.

Wan Xiang, accustomed to her master's occasional peculiar actions, watched with great interest.

Xiao Chuanzi reported from outside, "Reporting to the master, Xiao Linzi from the Chunlu Pavilion requests an audience."

"Oh," Yan Ge recalled his arrangement with Zhou Wenhan and put away the brush. "Wan Xiang, give him the musical score."

"Yes."

For the next few days, Yan Ge immersed himself entirely in learning the Flowing Sand Sword Technique. His speed increased, and he began to realize the exquisite nature of this sword technique. Not only could he feel his body growing stronger and healthier, but he also sensed a subtle warmth emanating from the lower abdomen. He suspected it to be the result of cultivating inner strength through the sword technique.

Meanwhile, outside the palace, Yan Xiaojing and Yan Su were amazed by Yan Ge's quick thinking and thorough planning. Although they wondered how he acquired such knowledge, they simply assumed he was inspired by others within the palace and didn't question the origin of those recipes. They immediately began making preparations for the restaurant. After all, the idea of borrowing a dead body to come back to life was unheard of, and they didn't even consider that possibility.

It wasn't until a month later that a eunuch came to Chunfeng Palace with an imperial edict.

Song Ruhao, Du Zhengfeng, and Zhou Wenhan came out joyfully to receive the imperial decree.

During this time, Song Ruhao had never given up on communicating with his father, hoping to persuade the Emperor to bestow his favor upon him.

Du Zhengfeng also occasionally strolled through the Imperial Garden, clearly showing that his mind was preoccupied with other matters.

Zhou Wenhan, on the other hand, persisted in playing the qin every day. About half a month ago, he had the fortunate opportunity to be summoned by the Emperor when he in the Imperial Garden and even received verbal praise from him. Although the Emperor did not reveal his true intentions that time, there was still great hope, wasn't there?

And now, the imperial edict had arrived. The faces of the three individuals beamed with delight.

Yan Ge knelt quietly at the back, not particularly concerned. The plan outside the palace was not in its final stage yet, and even if the Emperor wanted to summon him, it wouldn't be now.

The eunuch, who had witnessed countless anticipatory expressions from palace consorts, glanced at each of them and shook his head inwardly. Only after a moment did he announce, "The Emperor has issued an edict, summoning Yan Daying for an audience. Long live the Emperor."

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Song Ruhao, Du Zhengfeng, and Zhou Wenhuan simultaneously turned their heads to look at Yan Ge, their eyes filled with disbelief. Why would it be him? It's actually him!

Yan Ge was also puzzled. He endured the piercing gazes, and bowed, saying, "This servant expresses his gratitude. Long live the Emperor!"

Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi exchanged a glance, seeing excitement and joy in each other's eyes. They made an effort to restrain their exhilaration and silently followed.

Yan Ge, on the other hand, remained composed, walking at a steady pace.

The eunuch delivering the imperial decree glanced at him, secretly amazed. This eunuch's name was Deng Mande, and was in fact, the Emperor's personal eunuch and the head eunuch in the harem. He had been with the Emperor since his early childhood and was now in his thirties. He had a pair of small eyes, even when opened to the fullest, they were only two slits. However, the gleam that shot out from those slits seemed to penetrate everything.

The Emperor had him personally deliver the decree, also intending for him to secretly observe Yan Ge. Now, taking a look at him, he felt that this Yan Daying was quite intriguing. To possess such composure in the face of favor and at such a young age wasn't something that could be improvised or pretended. It came from accumulated experiences.

When they arrived outside Tenglong Palace, Yan Ge was initially overwhelmed by the solemn and dignified atmosphere of the grand palace. Indeed, it was the Emperor's sleeping quarters, completely different in style

from the palaces where concubines resided, exuding strength and dominance. There were guards stationed every three steps outside the palace, patrolling every moment, and the air around the guards exuded a fierce and vigilant aura.

Deng Mande went inside first to report, while Yan Ge waited outside the hall. It took some time, but Yan Ge remained unruffled, his face showing no signs of impatience.

After about five or six minutes, the sound of the transmission of messages from inside began to reach the outside, indicating the depth and vastness of the grand hall.

“Announcing Yan Daying’s presence for an audience—”

A young eunuch led Yan Ge inside and paused at a curtain. Yan Ge knew that beyond this point was the main hall. He lowered his head to check his attire, ensuring it was neat, then with a lowered gaze, he walked forward.

After seeing a red carpet spread out on the steps. He knelt down and bowed his head, saying, “This servant pays respects to the Emperor. Long live the Emperor!”

After a moment, a magnetic yet indifferent deep voice came from above, “Rise.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” Yan Ge lifted the hem of his robe and stood up.

“Raise your head.”

The corners of Yan Ge’s mouth twitched inwardly, but he followed the command and lifted his head. Having traveled to ancient times, he naturally had some curiosity about the Emperor. Taking advantage of the opportunity, he stole a few glances and silently marveled.

The Emperor was about twenty-four or twenty-five years old, his handsome features were beyond question, emanating an innate aura of dominance and awe-inspiring majesty. His sharp gaze focused straight ahead, sitting firmly

on the throne, as if he were sitting atop the entire kingdom with unwavering composure.

Deng Mande, who was standing beside the throne, was startled. This Yan Daying was too audacious, daring to directly gaze at the Emperor. He cautiously stole a glance at the Emperor.

However, Huangfu Yuchen showed no anger as he looked at Yan Ge and asked, “We heard that the recipes for the dishes at Liuxian Residence in the capital were created by you?”

Yan Ge was taken aback for a moment, then secretly delighted. Could it be that Yan Xiaojing and Yan Su had acted so swiftly that Liuxian Residence had already gained momentum?

Due to the inconvenience of contacting the outside palace, he had no idea of the extent of Yan Xiaojing and Yan Su’s excitement upon obtaining those recipes.

He was also eager to taste those delicious dishes, so he had instructed they use additional manpower, allowing the restaurant to open so quickly and gain a certain level of fame. Among those dishes, many were not even available in the palace, so it was only a matter of time before the news reached the palace.

“The servant dares not deceive Your Majesty. Since childhood, this concubine has had a fondness for exquisite cuisine and often indulged in whimsical musings during leisure time. Eventually, these dishes were conceived, and their flavors are indeed exceptional. Originally, I intended to present them to Your Majesty, but I feared it might be misunderstood as having ulterior motives. That is why I allowed the establishment of this restaurant beforehand. It is a great fortune that they can be tasted by Your Majesty”

Ordinary people could not enjoy what the Emperor had not enjoyed, so he had to provide a clear explanation to prevent implicating others.

“The servant also possesses another recipe book, containing dozens of additional dishes beyond what is available outside the palace. The servant dares to offer it to Your Majesty.” Yan Ge retrieved neatly stacked papers from his sleeve and presented them with both hands. Fortunately, in anticipation of an abrupt summoning by the Emperor, he had kept the papers on his person in recent days.

A trace of disdain and mockery flashed in Huangfu Yuchen’s eyes. Another fawning consort. From the information he had received, Yan Daying was clearly different from the other three male consorts. He rarely strolled in the Imperial Gardens, and he had never made any attempt to seek favor from the Emperor.

He had thought that Yan Daying was unique, but he felt disappointed today. However, this person’s thoughts were agile and timely, providing a clever explanation for his actions, so he couldn’t look down on him. Furthermore, Huangfu Yuhe mentioned the delicacies of Liuxian Residence every time he entered the palace, piquing his curiosity.

*Huangfu Yuhu is the brother.

Deng Mande descended and received the papers, confirming their safety before passing them to Huangfu Yuchen.

After a quick glance, Huangfu Yuchen’s appetite was aroused, and he couldn’t help but give Yan Ge a scrutinizing look. If these dishes were truly devised by him, it was indeed remarkable.

“Not bad. Deng Mande, reward Yan Ge with ten pieces of brocade and satin and five hundred taels of silver.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Yan Ge bowed in gratitude, saying, “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Huangfu Yuchen stated, “Very well, there are still state affairs that require my attention. Yan Daying, you may rise and retire.”

Yan Ge was taken aback. Finally seeing the Emperor, and it ended like this? He had no inkling that his “fawning” behavior had already sparked disdain in Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen didn’t miss the disappointment in his eyes. Could it be that he wanted more? It was pure greed. He found Yan Ge increasingly repulsive and frowned in displeasure.

Deng Mande, understanding the Emperor’s intentions, wore a stern expression and was about to speak.

Before Yan Ge could rise from his kneeling position, he lifted his head, smiled slightly at Huangfu Yuchen, and directly asked, “Your Majesty, would you like to enrich the national treasury?”

Huangfu Yuchen’s entire presence suddenly intensified, emanating a cold, solemn aura that engulfed Yan Ge.

Deng Mande’s expression also changed. The harem meddling in politics was a grave offense! Was Yan Daying seeking death? Not only did he dare to speak to the Emperor in such a tone, but his words were also extremely disrespectful and rebellious.

Throughout history, emperors cherished their reputation. Yan Ge wouldn’t court death no matter how audacious he was. He immediately, he prostrated himself to show submission, speaking rapidly to prevent Huangfu Yuchen from cutting him off. Using practical examples to appeal to his emotions, he said, “On the street where the servant’s family resides, there is a noodle shop that earns approximately three taels of silver per month. If there were a method to earn ten taels per month, they would not refuse it. With ten taels of silver, not only could they send all three children to school, but they might even open another noodle shop.”

Deng Mande was taken aback, staring at Huangfu Yuchen in bewilderment. The Emperor’s greatest concern was the well-being of the people, and Yan

Ge had found the right approach.

Yan Ge earnestly continued, “Your Majesty, the servant is not engaging in politics, nor does the servant dare to do so. The servant only wishes to dedicate oneself to Your Majesty’s welfare. It is merely an endeavor to contribute to the national treasury. How could it be regarded as meddling in politics?”

Huangfu Yuchen’s dark pupils deepened, locking onto Yan Ge, his silence unbroken. He never expected these words to come from a consort’s lips rather than from any minister. It must be said that Yan Ge’s words stirred his heart. As a ruler of his era, who wouldn’t desire a more abundant national treasury? With silver in hand, not only could the economy flourish, education thrive, and national defense strengthen, but even territorial expansion would no longer require concern over provisions and forces.

If he could truly develop the country into a powerful nation, he would become an emperor revered for all eternity. To be respected by his subjects and leave a lasting legacy is the dream of every emperor. However, although tempted, he could not allow a mere concubine to see through him, nor could he relinquish control of the “negotiations” to him.

This young man dared to speak these words to him, undoubtedly seeking something in return. Even if he might eventually agree to him, he should make this little concubine plead, and plead hard.

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Therefore, Huangfu Yuchen remained composed, casting a faint glance at Yan Ge and then picking up a memorial again.

Deng Mande was well aware of the Emperor's temperament. Seeing that the Emperor neither grew angry nor dismissed Yan Ge, there was still room for maneuvering in this matter. It was clear that the Emperor intentionally cold-shouldered Yan Ge for a certain purpose. Thus, Deng Mande pretended to urge Yan Ge, whispering softly, "Yan Daying, His Majesty is busy with state affairs. You should leave for now."

If he left this time, it would be difficult to see the Emperor again. Yan Ge didn't want to give up so easily. A brilliant idea struck him, and a plan formed in his mind. Since the Emperor hadn't commanded him to leave again, it meant he had not yet lost his temper. Why not take advantage of this opening? Yan Ge turned to Deng Mande and spoke in a low voice, "Eunuch Deng, I suppose you've heard of Liuxian Residence?"

Deng Mande had to cooperate with Huangfu Yuchen and couldn't ignore Yan Ge. He cautiously glanced at Huangfu Yuchen before whispering, "I have."

Yan Ge continued, "I have written a cookbook for my family, consisting of a total of 108 dishes. Each dish is a perfect blend of taste, aroma, and appearance. The vegetarian dishes are priced at 200 coins per dish, while the meat dishes have a minimum price of 1 tael per dish. Assuming Liuxian can simultaneously accommodate eight tables, with each table ordering eight dishes—four meat and four vegetarian—the total cost would be a minimum of 4 taels and 800 coins. For eight tables, it would amount to 32 taels and 6400 coins, or 38 taels and 400 coins. If each table takes one hour to finish their meal, we can host at least nine batches of guests each day.

Consequently, the total daily revenue would be 345 taels and 600 coins. Eunuch Deng, please calculate: Would we earn a total of 10,368 taels in a month?”

*1 tael of silver = 1000 copper coins

His mental calculation was spot-on, and there was hardly a pause when it came to calculations. Deng Mande looked at him in astonishment. “Yan Daying, you’ve figured it out so quickly?”

Huangfu Yuchen’s lowered eyes flickered with curiosity and contemplation.

Yan Ge nodded and continued, “This is merely my conservative estimate. The capital is vast, and there are numerous esteemed individuals. With just one restaurant, we could earn 10,000 liang per month. What if we open branches? What if we keep innovating? What if we establish branch restaurants in other cities as well?”

He deliberately paused and added, “This is just one of my ideas. If I come up with more ideas, I can create even greater wealth.”

Deng Mande caught a glimpse of Huangfu Yuchen tapping his fingers silently on the memorial and suggested, “Your Majesty, after listening to Yan Ge’s remarks, I find them quite reasonable. Why not give him an opportunity?”

Yan Ge was overjoyed and secretly resolved to reward Deng Mande with more money if he succeeded. He once again bowed before Huangfu Yuchen, his eyes curved with a smile. “Your Majesty, I’ve heard that some impoverished households reuse water used to rinse rice for dishwashing. It’s called the recycling of resources. As someone residing in the palace, I enjoy the best food, clothing, and living conditions. I don’t wish to indulge in such luxuries without making any contributions.”

“Why not give your servant a chance to fully display his abilities?”

Deng Mande found Yan Ge’s words amusing and couldn’t help but chuckle. But when he saw Huangfu Yuchen cast a faint glance at them, he quickly composed himself and fixed his gaze forward.

Huangfu Yuchen remained silent, seemingly oblivious to their conversation.

Yan Ge felt helpless. He lowered himself to such an extent, yet Huangfu Yuchen remained unmoved. In his previous life, he had run a company and dealt with all kinds of people, including crafty and cunning individuals, but he had never encountered anyone as inscrutable as Huangfu Yuchen. He licked his dry lips and continued to persuade, “Dahan Kingdom values culture. It’s not an exaggeration to say that every literate family uses a writing brush. If I can invent a more portable and convenient pen, one that can write smaller characters, thus saving paper, even if each pen is sold for just 2 coins, with millions of literate individuals in the country, I can earn at least 2,000 liang. And that’s only domestically. If I sell them abroad for 6 coins each, the profits would double…”

“Oh?” Huangfu Yuchen set the memorial aside and locked his gaze onto Yan Ge’s eyes. “Can you create such a pen?”

The palace maidens inside the hall suddenly changed their expressions and simultaneously knelt down, pressing their foreheads and arms against the ground, slightly trembling.

Yan Ge blinked, looking at Huangfu Yuchen in confusion.

Huangfu Yuchen remained silent, while Deng Mande waved his hand, gesturing for the palace maidens to withdraw.

Yan Ge saw that Huangfu Yuchen was waiting for his answer, and was no longer concerned about the palace maidens. He confidently replied, “Your Majesty, I have preliminary ideas that need to be prototyped and verified. The likelihood of success is ninety percent.”

Huangfu Yuchen stared at him for a long moment, until Yan Ge's smile froze on his face, then said, "You have conditions."

Yan Ge immediately replied, "Your servant dares not. However, your servant truly requires a more favorable environment to wholeheartedly serve Your Majesty."

Huangfu Yuchen said, "Tell me more."

Yan Ge felt a sudden warmth on his cheeks as he thought about his request. He cautiously said, "In that case, your servant dares to propose that for every 100,000 taels of silver that your servant contributes to the national treasury, your Majesty may consider promoting your servant's rank. Your servant does not seek your favor, but rather seeks advancement in rank. Your servant does not dare to harbor any unwarranted thoughts and only aspires to eventually reach the rank of Huang Guiqing."

*Ranks among male consorts: Daying, Changzai, Shirén (scholar), Cairen, Guiren, Shiqing, Caiqing (honorable official), Guiqing(Noble Consort), to Huang Guiqing(equivalent to Empress in the ranks of female consorts).

A trace of contempt flashed deep within Huangfu Yuchen's eyes, but it quickly vanished. He didn't mind whether Yan Ge even coveted the position of Empress. The palace was his domain, and no one could escape his grasp.

"A mere pen can earn you 2,000 taels. 100,000 taels is too little for a promotion," he said.

Yan Ge was taken aback, suddenly feeling a sense of unease.

Huangfu Yuchen smiled faintly, and his gaze unexpectedly softened. “200,000 taels of silver. For every 200,000 taels that you contribute to the national treasury, I will promote your rank once. Furthermore, if you can truly create the pen you mentioned, I will elevate you to Chanzai even before sales.”

200,000 taels! That was nearly equivalent to 200 million yuan! Yan Ge’s mouth twitched, and he suddenly felt that perhaps he shouldn’t have embarked on this journey.

“What’s the matter? Having second thoughts?” Huangfu Yuchen looked at him with interest, thoroughly enjoying his conflicted expression. “If you regret it, it’s not a problem. Considering your relative honesty, I pardon you. Deng Mande, escort him out.” Since Yan Ge had the courage to speak those words to him, it must be an important matter for him to seek a promotion. He believed that Yan Ge wouldn’t easily give up on this opportunity. It was a tactic of feigning weakness to capture the opponent.

“Wait!” Yan Ge’s mind raced, and he readily agreed, “Your servant accepts. However, your servant has one more condition. In order to facilitate your servant’s actions, please allow your servant to leave the palace.”

Deng Mande hurriedly interjected, “Your Majesty, this is not appropriate. After all, Yan Ge is Your Majesty’s consort, and it would be inappropriate for him to leave the palace. Your Majesty, this is not advisable.”

Yan Ge was greatly disappointed.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, pondering for a moment. “I cannot allow you to stay outside the palace, but I permit you to leave the palace every day at the hour of Chen and return before the hour of You.”

***“The hour of Chen” refers to 7:00 a.m., and “The hour of You” refers to before 7:00 p.m.**

That’s not bad either. Yan Ge nodded, saying, “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Huangfu Yuchen thought for a moment and added, “To avoid trouble, from now on, you will reside in my Tenglong Palace.”

Yan Ge was taken aback. He had only intended to let the other palace consorts know that he and the Emperor were getting closer. He hadn’t expected to receive unexpected rewards.

“Any objections?” Huangfu Yuchen asked with a profound tone.

Yan Ge hastily replied, “None.” Residing in Tenglong Palace meant exactly that. He had always intended to curry favor with Huangfu Yuchen. Moreover, living in Tenglong Palace would also allow him to avoid the Internal strife among the other three male consorts of Chunfeng Palace. Why wouldn’t he be delighted?

Deng Mande looked at the back-and-forth between the two of them, filled with worry and hesitation. He voiced his concerns, “Your Majesty, are you truly going to agree to Yan Daying’s request? After all, Yan Daying is Your Majesty’s concubine, and if he goes out of the palace like this every day, there might be security concerns…”

Yan Ge was speechless. What security concerns? Clearly, Deng Mande was worried about the Emperor being cuckolded.

Huangfu Yuchen gave Deng Mande an approving look and said, “Eunuch Deng Mande’s concerns are valid. Since Yan Daying has agreed, and considering that he will only have one palace maid and one eunuch by his side, it’s clear that he’ll be understaffed. In that case, I will assign two assistants to help you.”

Yan Ge sighed helplessly. These two people were undoubtedly meant to monitor him. But at the moment, he couldn’t care about that. Being granted half of his freedom every day was already satisfying enough. As for other matters, he would plan them out slowly in the future. He only hoped that the rewards he would receive from the system in the future would be worth his sacrifices.

“That would be wonderful. Thank you, Your Majesty,” Yan Ge expressed his gratitude.

Huangfu Yuchen turned to Deng Mande and said, “Xuan Gaofeng, Gao Yun.”

After a while, two tall men strode in, wearing black robes and black cloaks with red borders. Their aura, bearing, and footsteps all carried the essence of the military, exhibiting a sense of sternness, efficiency, and precision. From their silent approach, Yan Ge deduced that they were highly skilled.

“Paying respects to Your Majesty!”

“Rise.” Huangfu Yuchen addressed Yan Ge, “They belong to the Forbidden Army and are among the top experts within the palace. They will follow you from now on.”

Yan Ge knelt down to express his thanks.

Huangfu Yuchen turned to Gao Feng and Gao Yun, saying, “From now on, Yan Daying is your master. You must protect him well. Is that clear?”

“Your subordinates obey your orders,” Gao Feng and Gao Yun replied in unison.

“Alright then, Yan Daying, you may withdraw.”

“Yes! Your servant takes his leave.”

Huangfu Yuchen relaxed, leaning back in his chair, and watched with great interest as Yan Ge’s figure disappeared behind the curtain.

Deng Mande asked, “Your Majesty seems to be quite interested in Yan Daying?”

“I am indeed curious. I want to see if he truly possesses the abilities he claims. We shall wait and see,” Huangfu Yuchen replied. “I don’t want today’s events to be known by others. As for the previous palace maids…”

“Leave it to me, Your Majesty,” Deng Mande assured him.

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Once outside Tenglong Palace, Yan Ge took out a silver note of one hundred taels and handed it to Gao Feng. “You can use this for now. As members of the Imperial Guard, you must know the proper channels to leave the palace. Arrange for a carriage to be prepared, and starting from tomorrow, wait outside the Beiyang Gate every morning at the beginning of the Chen hour.”

Gao Feng did not expect their new master to be so efficient, giving them a task so quickly. However, after a brief moment of surprise, he exchanged a glance with Gao Yun and responded, “Yes.”

Both of them felt some discontentment in serving under a Daying, but they dared not disobey the Emperor’s command.

“Both of you may return for today. In the future, come in plain clothes and wait outside the Tenglong Palace,” Yan Ge instructed.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun exchanged another glance and replied in unison, “Yes.”

Once they had walked away, Wan Xiang asked in a low voice, “Young Master, who are they?”

Yan Ge replied, “They were sent by the Emperor to protect me.”

Although Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi had been in the palace for several years, they had mainly performed menial tasks and had relatively simple thoughts. As long as it was what Yan Ge said, they were delighted to believe.

Back at the Chunfeng Palace, Zhou Wenhan was sipping tea in the pavilion. When he saw Yan Ge, he gestured to him.

Yan Ge instructed Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi, “You may return and tidy up. The Inner Court should send someone to assist.”

“Yes, Master.”

Yan Ge approached Zhou Wenhan, glanced at the sky, and smiled, “Zhou Daying, why are you sitting here alone? It’s quite hot today.”

Zhou Wenhan had a stern expression as he set down his teacup. “Yan Daying, don’t play dumb with me. Let me ask you, did you tell the Emperor that the music score belongs to you? Otherwise, why would the Emperor summon you instead of me?”

Yan Ge helplessly touched his forehead. “Then let me ask Zhou Daying, since the day I went to see you until yesterday, when did you see me leave the Chunfeng Palace?”

Zhou Wenhan was momentarily speechless. After moving into the Chunfeng Palace, he had spent a large sum of money to bribe a guard outside the Chunfeng Palace. He knew whenever the other three male consorts of the Chunfeng Palace entered or left. Indeed, he hadn’t received any news about Yan Ge leaving the Chunfeng Palace.

At this realization, his attitude immediately softened, and he smiled at Yan Ge. “It is indeed hot today. I’ve been sitting here for so long, and my head is feeling a bit dizzy. By the way, Yan Daying, do you know why the Emperor summoned you? Why did it take you so long?”

Yan Ge replied, “Oh, the Emperor asked me to move out of the Chunfeng Palace.”

Zhou Wenhan initially felt happy, but then a sudden shock crossed his face, and he hurriedly asked, “And move to where?”

Yan Ge responded, “To the Tenglong Palace.”

“What?!” Zhou Wenhan nearly fell off the stone bench.

Yan Ge stood up. “Zhou Daying, the people from the Ministry of Internal Affairs have arrived. Please excuse me. We can talk another time.”

With that, he quickly walked away.

The seven eunuchs hurriedly made their way to the Chunfang Courtyard.

Yan Ge observed the one leading them, who held his head high with a hint of arrogance. Judging by his demeanor, Yan Ge guessed that he held a high rank. He politely inquired, “Are you the eunuchs from the Internal Affairs?”

The eunuch also treated him politely, immediately smiling and having his subordinates bow to Yan Ge. “We pay our respects to Yan Daying.”

“Please rise, eunuch.”

The head eunuch gave a flattering smile and said, “Thank you, Yan Daying. I am Zhang Yongfu, the Deputy Chief of the Internal Affairs. You may call me Xiao Zhangzi. Yan Daying is the first consort to reside in the Emperor’s chambers in nearly a millennium, so I have come here to congratulate you!”

There was a hierarchy among the palace guards, court ladies, and eunuchs, and as the Deputy Chief of the Internal Affairs, Zhang Yongfu held the rank of Fourth Class. Although Yan Ge was only a Fifth Class consort, being the Emperor’s consort made him the “master,” while Zhang Yongfu was a servant, so he still had to show respect to Yan Ge. However, his rank was higher than Yan Ge’s, so he did not need to kneel.

Just a moment ago, Yan Ge was still wondering why a small change in his residence required the Deputy Chief to personally assist him. The reason became clear now.

In the palace, people generally followed the survival rule that having one more friend was better than having one more enemy. Zhang Yongfu was no exception. Today, Yan Daying was able to move into the Tenglong Palace. Who knew if he would rise to a higher position tomorrow? Since entering

the palace, this Yan Daying had been anonymous and silent, but now he suddenly moved into the Tenglong Palace. Truly, he had made a stunning debut! Once the news of his move spread, the entire harem would be in an uproar.

Yan Ge smiled and said, “So it’s Xiao Zhang. Thank you for your trouble. Please come this way.”

“I dare not. Yan Daying, please go first.”

When entering the palace, Yan Ge had brought along some personal items, as well as the basic necessities provided as per regulations and the rewards he had received this time. It was not much. Zhang Yongfu had brought six people with him, more than enough manpower.

As they walked out of the courtyard, Song Ruhao, Du Zhengfeng, and Zhou Wenhan came to see Yan Ge off.

Since he began training in swordsmanship, Yan Ge’s senses had become much sharper than before. He felt a piercing gaze on him and immediately looked over. Song Ruhao’s eyes instinctively evaded his gaze for a moment, perhaps just a second, before he quickly smiled, his expression warm and gentle, as if blessing him.

Yan Ge was amused inwardly. Unexpectedly, Song Ruhao was deceptive.

Song Ruhao, accompanied by Du Zhengfeng and Zhou Wenhan, walked over and smiled, “Congratulations, Yan Daying. The three of us are reluctant to part with you. If it weren’t for the Emperor’s decree to change your residence, I would have definitely sought an imperial edict to keep you.”

Yan Ge returned the smile and bowed, “Thank you for your kind words, Song Guiren. During this period, I have relied on the care of Song Guiren, Du Changzai, and Zhou Daying.”

Zhou Wenhan also smiled warmly, “ Yan Daying, you’re too polite. I believe that we will have the opportunity to meet again in the future.”

Yan Ge’s smile grew even brighter. “Indeed. It’s getting late. Song Guiren, Du Changzai, this servant will go ahead.”

Song Ruhao nodded.

The three of them watched as Yan Ge leisurely departed, with even Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi walking swiftly. The minds of the three were filled with different thoughts.

MCUS Chapter 22

The Tenglong Palace was the emperor’s residence, and the main palace of the imperial harem. It had a throne, side palaces and warm pavilions in the east and west, while the north had twenty identical wings. Each of these wings was the emperor’s bedroom, where he slept in a different room every night, supposedly as a precaution against assassins. That being said…

Yan Ge’s new residence was one of the side palaces, named Luoxue Palace. It offered a panoramic view with a wide expanse in three directions: a lake in the front, mountains at the back, and a forest to the left. During winter, the emperor occasionally stays there for a period of time to enjoy the snow. Now this splendid place had become Yan Ge’s abode, and he was quite satisfied with it. Although Luoxue Palace was connected to the emperor’s bedroom, it was not particularly close, and one could enter and leave the Tenglong Palace through another route. This arrangement didn’t disturb Huangfu Yuchen, and he felt more at ease.

After tidying up his new residence, Yan Ge made himself presentable and followed the proper etiquette to express his gratitude to the emperor.

Huangfu Yuchen did not meet him in person. Instead, he sent a eunuch to convey a message, granting him half a month to work on the new pen and presenting him with a golden token that allowed him unrestricted departure and entry to the palace. The token bore the character “Emperor,” signifying the emperor’s personal command.

Yan Ge felt helpless. Today, both his body and mind had endured a great battle, and it was already getting dark. Wasn’t it reasonable for him to rest before he devoted himself wholeheartedly again? He had confidence in making a fountain pen, so he wasn’t in a rush.

After having a late meal, he practiced swordsmanship unwaveringly for an hour before finally starting to draw the design for the pen.

In order to achieve finer lines, he specifically had Xiao Chuanzi and Wan Xiang retrieve goose feathers from the Emerald Lake, which he sharpened with a knife and dipped in ink.

The effect was quite satisfactory.

He was thankful for his childhood curiosity when he once dismantled a fountain pen to take a look. To make a fountain pen, one must first understand its components, including the nib, ink cartridge, ink sac, barrel, and cap. He drew each part separately, labeling them with numbers, and then depicted the step-by-step assembly process to ensure that the workers could understand. After finishing the drawing, he had a good night’s rest.

The next day, he rose early and changed into casual attire. These clothes were the ones he had brought with him when he entered the palace, looser and more comfortable than the male consort palace attire. When he put them on, he appeared even more handsome. He also carried a folding fan, undoubtedly looking like a graceful young man.

Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi were his only helpers within the palace. They still had to be cultivated carefully, so he would go out of the palace with them. Huangfu Yuchen knew he had few people to rely on, so he probably wouldn’t mind this minor matter.

He carefully placed the token into his sleeve pocket, but still felt somewhat uneasy. Thieves were skillful, whether in ancient or modern times. If he were to lose this token, it would be troublesome. He recalled the system backpack, “Xiao Jin.”

“Master, you finally remembered me? I’ve been so bored on my own.”

“Can items not originating from the system be stored in the backpack?”

“Of course they can. Didn’t you know, Master?”

Yan Ge: “…”

With a thought, the token disappeared from his hand and appeared in the backpack.

Yan Jin said pitifully, “Master, I can’t see the outside world without your permission. Can I frequently come out and have a look? Being alone is incredibly boring.”

Yan Ge hesitated. The feeling of being followed by invisible eyes at all times was uncomfortable, as if another person resided within his body.

Yan Jin seemed to have guessed his thoughts and sighed helplessly, “Master, you don’t pay too much attention to me. There’s a gray button in the system, after activating it, I can see the situation of your location. When it’s deactivated, I can’t see anything.”

“I see,” Yan Ge searched the screen and indeed found a gray button. “Alright, I will let you see the outside world. However, I will close it when necessary. Xiao Jin, I hope you understand.” Yan Ge unconsciously treated Yan Jin as a person. He would be with this system until his death and he hoped to maintain a good relationship with it.

Yan Jin happily exclaimed, “I understand, I understand! Master, you’re so kind.”

Listening to his sweet and joyful voice, Yan Ge’s mood also became good.

“Let’s go out of the palace.”

At this time, it was still early, equivalent to just past six o’clock, and the sky was not yet fully bright. However, the lights in the main hall were already lit because the morning court was held around this time.

Not long after walking out of Luoxue Palace, he met Huangfu Yuchen walking towards the main hall from another direction, followed by a large group of court ladies and eunuchs, carrying empty dragon chariots. The early court was held in the Taiping Palace in the center of the entire palace.

Meeting Huangfu Yuchen was inevitable, and Yan Ge took a few steps forward to pay his respects.

“This servant pays respects to Your Majesty, may Your Majesty be blessed.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s gaze fell upon him, lingering for a few seconds, his eyes deep with meaning. He then motioned for Yan Ge to rise. “You may rise.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Huangfu Yuchen observed how effortlessly and decisively Yan Ge stood up, as if he had been prepared to rise at any moment. He raised his eyebrows meaningfully, glanced at Yan Ge then continued on.

Only then did Yan Ge go to the palace gate and stepped out. Gao Feng and Gao Yun were already waiting outside, dressed in casual attire.

“Greetings, Yan Daying. May you have auspiciousness,” Gao Feng said.

Yan Ge replied, “No need for formalities. Outside the palace, you may address me as ‘Young master’.”

“Understood.”

The five of them exited the palace through the Beiyang Gate. Not far away, a carriage and two horses were waiting. If it weren’t for considering Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi, Yan Ge would have preferred to ride a horse. Riding a horse was faster and more convenient.

The carriage driver was a young man who appeared honest, probably in his early twenties. When he saw Gao Feng, he immediately jumped down from the carriage.

“Master Feng.”

Gao Feng said, “Young master, this is Xiaosl Shuanzi. He is humble and doesn’t speak much. No matter what he sees or hears, he won’t blabber about it.”

Yan Ge nodded approvingly, “Very good.”

Gao Feng introduced Xiao Shuanzi, “He is Young Master Yan, your master from now on.”

Unaware that Yan Ge was actually a palace consort, Xiao Shuanzi still guessed that he was a person of high status since he came from the palace. He knelt down and said, “Xiao Shuanzi pays respects to Young Master.”

“Please rise. Your monthly allowance will be one tael, and if you perform well, I will increase it. But if you perform poorly… heh.”

Xiao Shuanzi hurriedly replied, “I dare not. I will serve Young Master with all my heart.” He couldn’t conceal his joy. One tael was quite a lot. Previously, he earned just over 300 coins for washing dishes at an inn for a whole month.

Yan Ge instructed, “Prepare for departure. Let’s go to Yan Mansion first.”

It was a decision he carefully considered. If nothing unexpected happened, he would frequently operate in the capital city in the future, and sooner or later, the Yan family would find out about him. It was better to inform them early on to avoid unnecessary complications. Moreover, when he expanded his business in the future, he would certainly need the support of Yan Mansion in terms of finances, connections, and government affairs. Since he and Yan Mansion were already bound together, he would make good use of this connection.

“Yes, Young Master, please.” Xiao Shuanzi promptly took out a stepping stool from the carriage.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun rode their horses alongside the carriage.

Yan Ge asked Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi, “I overheard Xiao Shuanzi calling Gao Feng ‘Master Feng.’ Do you two know what that’s about?”

Xiao Chuanzi explained, “Young Master, it’s like this. Those who can serve as guards in the palace are all children of officials. Ordinary people don’t

have this qualification. These guards may be ordinary inside the palace, but outside, they are masters."

"I see," Yan Ge understood.

Wan Xiang whispered, "I have inquired before. Gao Feng and Gao Yun are blood brothers. Their original names weren't Gao Feng and Gao Yun, but because of their excellent martial arts skills, His Majesty personally bestowed them the names 'Feng' and 'Yun.' His Majesty sent such skilled guards to protect young master. How kind of him!"

Yan Ge smiled knowingly but didn't explain. After all, he had no intention of engaging in things like treason. With these two powerful individuals by his side, he would have enough assistance.

MCUS Chapter 23

The carriage arrived at the entrance of Yan Mansion just as the sky was brightening. The two gatekeepers, Yan Ji and Yan Xiang, were cleaning the area when they saw the unfamiliar carriage stopping in front of the house. They were puzzled until they saw Yan Ge stepping out from inside, causing them great shock. Wasn't Second Young Master supposed to have entered the palace?

"Se… Second, Second Young Master?"

Yan Ge smiled and said, "Go and inform Madam that I have returned. Keep it discreet."

"Yes, yes."

Yan Ji dropped the broom and hurried inside.

Madam Yan walked out quickly, both overjoyed and shocked to see Yan Ge. She was only worried that something unfortunate had happened, and that the Emperor had driven him out of the palace. She grabbed Yan Ge's arm, her voice trembling, "Ge'er, what… what's going on?"

"Mother, don't worry, it's good news." Yan Ge patted her hand and supported her. "Let's go inside and talk."

Gao Feng and Gao Yun, who were monitoring him, could not be left outside, so he signaled them to enter as well.

Once they were seated in the hall, Madam Yan immediately asked, "Ge'er, what exactly happened? Explain it clearly to mother."

Yan Ge said, “It’s difficult to explain in a short time. In any case, it’s good news. The Emperor gave me a token that allows me to leave the palace every day, and he also assigned two skilled imperial guards to protect me. They are Gao Feng and Gao Yun, elite guards skilled in combat.”

Gao Feng and Gao Yun respectfully saluted, “Greetings, Madam Yan.”

Madam Yan carefully examined the token and saw the genuine smile on Yan Ge’s face before finally believing him. She breathed a sigh of relief and said, “You naughty child! You startled mother by suddenly returning like this.”

“I apologize for worrying you,” Yan Ge said. “Did Father leave for court? Is Elder Brother not here as well?”

“Yes, your father went to the Imperial Academy for official business,” Madam Yan looked at him affectionately. “Did you wake up early today? Are you hungry? I’ll have someone prepare food for you.”

“I’m not hungry,” Yan Ge replied. “Mother, I want to go to Liuxian Pavilion first. I’ll return and have lunch with you when Father and Elder Brother come back.”

Madam Yan had missed him a lot and felt reluctant to let him go. After hesitating for a moment, she nodded, “Alright. Don’t stay out too late. I’ll have them prepare your favorite dishes. Take this jade pendant with you, so that people in the restaurant will know you’re the owner.”

Before leaving, Yan Ge instructed Madam Yan to take good care of the household staff. It would be best if they didn’t spread the news about the palace consort had left the palace.

Madam Yan smiled faintly, and a hint of shrewdness could be seen in her normally gentle eyes. “Don’t worry, I’m not that clueless. Rest assured, no one will say a word.”

Yan Ge found Madam Yan quite cute as a woman from ancient times, and he hugged her affectionately, making Madam Yan burst into laughter.

In the capital city where every inch of land was valuable, the prime locations had already been occupied by various types of shops, including numerous restaurants. Yan Xiaojing and Yan Su had put a lot of effort into finding a suitable place on a slightly less bustling street. It was a two-story grand restaurant, but unfortunately, it lacked uniqueness and was poorly managed.

Eventually, it closed down amidst fierce competition in the restaurant industry. Yan Xiaojing and Yan Su bought it and it was now under Madam Yan's name.

"When we go to Liuxian Pavilion later, don't reveal my identity as the owner."

"Yes," all four of them responded.

Yan Ge advised Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi, "I might have further use for you in the future. So, while you're outside, observe and learn more. If you have any doubts, don't hesitate to ask. I don't keep useless people by my side. Understood?"

Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi had seen how extraordinary there master, especially since he was able to move into Tenglong Palace, and when they heard his words, became excited and thrilled.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun exchanged a glance, slightly altering their perception of Yan Ge. From his demeanor and style of conduct alone, they could tell that this young master was extraordinary, unlike typical young masters from official families. Could it be that the Emperor had also recognized this, which led to the unprecedented decision of allowing a consort to freely leave the palace, a move considered shocking and unconventional?

Upon reaching the entrance of Liuxian Pavilion, the carriage came to a stop, and three waiters dressed in identical black attire approached them. "Welcome, esteemed guests. Allow me to take care of your horses and ensure they are well attended to."

At the same time, a waiter dressed in clean and tidy white attire rushed down the steps from the entrance, greeting Yan Ge, who was clearly in the dominant position. “Please, young master, come inside! Is it your first time here? The dishes at Liuxian Pavilion are unparalleled. I assure you that you won’t regret this visit. Please!”

Enthusiastic without being wordy. Yan Ge nodded secretly.

The waiters in black attire led the carriage and horses to the stable behind the restaurant.

The waiter asked, “Would the young master prefer a quiet private room or to sit in the bustling main hall?”

Yan Ge surveyed the surroundings. The morning business was good, and the main hall was quickly filling up.

“In the main hall.”

“Yes, this way, please.” The waiter led them to an empty table.

Yan Ge instructed Gao Feng, Gao Yun, Wan Xiang, and Xiao Chuanzi to sit together at the same table. Gao Feng and Gao Yun hesitated for a moment but eventually sat down. Xiao Shuanzi stubbornly refused to sit with them and chose to sit at another table, so Yan Ge had no choice but to let him be.

“May I know what you would like to eat? Here is the menu.”

Yan Ge smiled and said, “Eat without worry, this meal is on me.” He ordered a steamed dumpling and a fish slice porridge for himself and asked the others to place their orders.

Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi knew that their master’s word was final, so they confidently ordered what they desired. Gao Feng, Gao Yun, and Xiao Shuanzi initially had some reservations but followed suit and ordered their preferred dishes.

Yan Ge looked around the main hall. It was clean and well-maintained, with new tables and chairs. The walls had been freshly painted, each table was

separated by four round wooden pillars adorned with delicate sheer curtains, creating an atmosphere of privacy and adding a touch of elegance. The neatly dressed waiter moved calmly through the aisle, silently placing each dish on the table and politely saying, “Enjoy your meal,” before moving on.

His gaze focused on the manager behind the counter. The man was a slender middle-aged man in his forties. The combination of refinement and shrewdness was not contradictory in him. He was currently engrossed in his calculations, and the smile at the corner of his mouth revealed that business had been good recently.

Yan Ge calculated silently, deducing that the main hall could accommodate at least 30 tables. Judging by the area, the second floor would have at least 10 elegant private rooms. With stable business, the minimum monthly income would be 20,000 taels. Assuming each room accommodated only four people, Liuxian Pavilion could cater to 40 distinguished guests. However, given the size of the capital city, there must be more than 40 distinguished individuals. In other words, a second Liuxian Pavilion, or even a third, could certainly be established.

As Yan Ge pondered, a customer at a nearby table suddenly clutched his stomach and fell to the ground, exclaiming, “Ah, my stomach hurts!”

Then, the other two people at the same table also writhed on the ground.

“I feel the pain too! The food at Liuxian Pavilion is contaminated. We can’t eat it—”

“We must have been poisoned!”

“What?!”

The customers in the main hall immediately panicked, standing up in alarm and looking anxiously at the food they had already consumed on their tables.

Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi’s expressions changed, both turning their gaze toward Yan Ge.

“Gao Feng, keep an eye on the food at that table. No one is allowed to touch it. Gao Yun, find a doctor immediately,” Yan Ge said in a low voice, calmly sitting and leisurely eating steamed dumplings, his gaze flickering towards the manager.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun followed his orders and departed.

The Manager’s face turned pale. He stepped out from behind the counter and hurriedly walked towards the three individuals. “How could this be poisoning? The food at Liuxian Pavilion is the cleanest! Did people from other restaurants ask you to come and deliberately cause trouble? I’ve seen such tricks many times! Everyone, everyone, please don’t believe them…”

Yan Ge frowned, and he put down his chopsticks.

“Then why does my stomach hurt so much? It must be a problem with your food!”

“Yeah, I feel the same.”

“Take them away first,” the manager said with a stern expression, instructing several bewildered waiters, and desperately trying to persuade the departing customers, ”Everyone, it’s definitely not a problem with our food. Otherwise, why would only the people at that table have stomachaches?”

The customers valued their lives and wouldn’t easily believe him. Many of them hastily left, calling for a doctor. Some bolder individuals, who didn’t feel any pain in their own stomachs for now, stayed behind, crowding together to watch the commotion.

The main hall became significantly emptier.

Yan Ge walked a few steps and glanced at the three individuals, their faces indeed looking abnormal. He then asked the manager, “Manager, shouldn’t

we call a doctor for them first?”

The manager, seething with anger over the potential adverse impact of this incident on Liuxian Pavilion, didn’t bother to turn his head. He retorted impatiently, “It’s obvious that those three are faking it—”

Yan Ge’s smile grew wider, although his eyes revealed displeasure. “Oh? Are you so sure? What if they are genuinely ill? Can you bear the responsibility?”

The manager looked over in fury and was about to get angry, but suddenly his mind cleared. Most of those who could afford to dine at Liúxiānju had bug backgrounds. He couldn’t afford to inadvertently offend someone important.

“Young master, please rest assured. I, Yuan Mou, will definitely handle this matter properly.”

Yan Ge glanced at him indifferently.

“Young master, the doctor has arrived.”

Gao Yun swiftly used his lightness technique and returned quickly, holding a startled old physician.

“Doctor, please examine them quickly,” urged Wan Xiang. She knew that this restaurant was owned by her master’s family and she was especially concerned.

The old physician nodded and began taking their pulses.

“Hmm, it’s poisoning. Fortunately, it’s only a mild case, with symptoms of abdominal pain. They just need to consume a medicinal concoction and they will be fine.”

“The food at Liuxian Pavilion is actually poisonous!” The customers murmured, their faces filled with anger, indicating they would not come back in the future.

Yan Ge promptly spoke up, “Doctor, could you please examine all the dishes on every table and determine if it’s only the food on one table that is poisoned or if all the dishes are contaminated?”

The manager saw his composed and tactful handling, and snapped out of his daze, wondering who he was.

Upon hearing Yan Ge’s statement, the customers became somewhat curious.

The old physician used a silver needle to examine all the dishes, and with certainty, he said, “Only the porridge on this particular table is poisoned.”

Yan Ge immediately addressed everyone, saying, “Now, everyone can see it. More than one table ordered the lean meat porridge, but only this table was affected. It’s evident that Liuxian’s food is absolutely fine; the problem lies with these three individuals.”

The guilty trio averted their gazes, trying to climb to their feet and escape, but Gao Yun drew his sword and confronted them.

The remaining customers didn’t have any adverse reactions, so they believed Yan Ge’s words and shook their heads before dispersing.

Soon, only Yan Ge and his group, the three suspects, the manager, and the staff remained in the hall.

Yan Ge issued his orders, “Gao Yun, Xiao Chuanzi, quickly find more people and spread the news about someone intentionally poisoning the food. Hopefully, we can salvage Liuxian Pavilion’s reputation in a timely manner.”

“Yes!”

Yan Ge handed Gao Yun a silver note worth one hundred taels. As for the loose coins he gave Xiao Chuanzi before leaving the palace, it was for any potential needs that might arise.

The manager instructed the wait staff to bind the three poisoned people, then bowed to Yan Ge, “Many thanks to the young master for lending

assistance. May I dare to ask for the young master’s distinguished name?”

Yan Ge presented his jade pendant.

The manager’s expression changed instantly, his lips quivered, but he didn’t say a word.

MCUS Chapter 24

“Find a place to talk,” Yan Ge said in a stern voice.

The manager trembled with fear and said, “Yes, young master. Please follow me.”

Xiao Shuanzi didn’t go with them; he stayed in the lobby and drank tea.

In the private room, Yan Ge stared at the manager with sharp eyes.

“Today, you have made three mistakes.”

The manager poured him a cup of tea, placed the teapot down, wiped the sweat off his forehead, and repeatedly said, “Please speak, young master. Please speak.”

“First, when a customer gets a problem in the restaurant, regardless of whether it is related to the restaurant or not, you should first call for a doctor. The saying, ‘Customers are like ancestors,’ is not without reason.”

The Manager mumbled, “Yes, yes. Yuan is indeed…”

Yan Ge didn’t give him a chance to speak. “Second, if a customer makes a suggestion about the restaurant or any of its employees, whether it is constructive or not, you must maintain a humble attitude. Even if the other party is being unreasonable, you should still be polite. Today, fortunately, it was me. Suppose someone else had suggested that Manager Yuan call for a doctor. Would Manager Yuan have responded in the same way? Anyone who enters the restaurant is a customer of the restaurant. Even if this time they only came to watch the excitement, they may become a customer of the restaurant in the future.”

“You are right to admonish, young master,” the manager lowered his head further. Despite this young master’s young age, his presence was formidable.

“Third, it is about dealing with unexpected situations. Regardless of any accidents that occur, the priority should be to make the customers feel comfortable and satisfied. For example, in today’s incident, many customers panicked and left. What you should have done is to reassure them instead of dryly emphasizing that there was absolutely no problem with the food in the restaurant.”

“Yuan will certainly pay attention in the future,” Manager Yuan said hastily.

Wan Xiang listened attentively, deep in thought.

Gao Feng’s eyes were filled with surprise.

Yan Ge took a sip of tea, and his tone softened slightly. “Bring the account book for me to inspect.”

“Yes.”

After Manager Yuan left, Wan Xiang couldn’t help but say, “Young master, this manager has caused so much trouble for the restaurant. Are you just letting him off like this?”

“Why not? Since Father and Elder Brother chose him as the manager, this person must have some redeeming qualities. Moreover, I can’t find a replacement for the time being. I’ll have to wait and discuss the specific situation with Father and Elder Brother.”

After a while, Manager Yuan walked in holding several account books.

“Young master, today’s accounts are all here.”

“Mmm.” Yan Ge picked up the latest one and flipped through it. “Bring writing materials.”

For the convenience of the customers, each private room was equipped with the Four Treasures of a Study, so Wan Xiang brought them over directly.

Yan Ge mentally calculated the accounts, occasionally jotting down a number on paper. He randomly checked ten entries and didn't find any problems. He nodded and put the account book down.

"How are the recipes kept? And who keeps them?"

The manager said, "Except for the first three days before the opening, four different meat dishes and two vegetarian dishes are introduced for lunch and dinner respectively, thereafter, a new dish is introduced every two days. Master Yan informs Chef Song and Chef Liu about the recipes one day in advance. Each of them has a dedicated small kitchen for preparing specialty dishes. Only they hold the recipes for those dishes. Even I am unaware of the recipes."

Yan Ge did not inquire about the reliability of these two chefs. The chefs were hired by Yan Xiaojing and Yan Su, and questioning the manager about their trustworthiness would imply doubting his own father and brother in front of outsiders.

Yan Ge returned to the initial topic. "Today's incident will undoubtedly have a certain impact on Liuxian Pavilion. Have you thought about how to salvage the situation, manager?"

The Manager sighed helplessly. "I've thought of two ways: either introduce a specialty dish in advance or lower the prices appropriately to attract customers."

Wan Xiang nodded inwardly, finding the suggestions reasonable.

Gao Feng stood with his arms crossed on the side, thinking that both options were feasible.

Yan Ge shook his folding fan and shook his head. "Not appropriate. Liuxian Pavilion is an upscale restaurant that caters to wealthy customers with high spending power. Since these customers are willing to spend extravagantly,

how could they be concerned about a few tens of coins or a couple of ounces of silver you lower the prices by? As for introducing an additional specialty dish, it’s too late to find Master Yan now.”

Hearing his analysis, the manager immediately became anxious, pounding his head and stomping his feet. “This! What should we do then? Liuxian Pavilion cannot be ruined under my watch!”

Yan Ge put down his folding fan, looked at him calmly yet sternly, and with a slight curl of his lips, said, “Seeing that you sincerely worry for the restaurant, this young master will help you once more.”

He picked up a pen and swiftly wrote down a new recipe.

–Aromatic Pork Chops.

“For the next three days, every table at Liuxian pavilion will be presented with a complimentary serving of Aromatic Pork Chops, but only one serving per table. At the same time, inform the customers that this dish will never appear on Liuxian Pavilion’s menu again, nor will it be available in any other restaurant. That’s all, don’t ask for more.”

The manager tactfully refrained from asking further questions and expressed his gratitude profusely. “Thank you so much, young master! I, Yuan will forever remember your life-saving favor today.”

“For the rest, figure it out on your own,” Yan Ge said as he briskly opened his folding fan, stood up, and left.

MCUS Chapter 25

“Brother Huangfu, I am here to accompany you for lunch.” Huangfu Yuhu emerged from behind the curtain with a mischievous smile on his face, striding into the grand hall.

Huangfu Yuhu and Huangfu Yuchen were both sons of the Empress Dowager, with Huangfu Yuhu being three years younger than Huangfu Yuchen. After Huangfu Yuchen ascended the throne, all his brothers had to change the character “ ” in their names to “ ” due to the taboo associated with the character “ ”. Being biological brothers, Huangfu Yuhu and Huangfu Yuchen shared a deep bond. Huangfu Yuhu could enter the Tenglong Palace without prior notice, indicating the immense trust Huangfu Yuchen had in him.

Huangfu Yuchen continued to review the memorials, not lifting his head. “Haven’t you been dining at Liuxian Pavilion lately?”

“Don’t mention it,” Huangfu Yuhu waved his hand with a hint of frustration, “I received news today that the food at Liuxian Pavilion is not clean. Someone fell ill after eating there in the morning. I dare not go there again.”

“Oh?” Huangfu Yuchen raised his head, intrigued. That person had finally obtained the opportunity to leave the palace, and Huangfu Yuchen was certain he would visit Liuxian Pavilion. What would be his reaction? Helplessness? Or an invigorated spirit?

The person he referred to was currently on his way back to the Yan Mansion.

“Master,” Wan Xiang said, “Since the aromatic pork chop can be presented as a gift, it must be a delicious dish. Why is it only available for three days and will never be served again?”

Gao Yun and Xiao Chuanzi heard about this matter after returning and were curious, so they pricked up their ears.

Yan Ge smiled and said, “It’s just exploiting people’s curiosity.”

“Curiosity?” Xia Chuanzi scratched his head. “I don’t understand, master.”

Yan Ge pondered for a moment. “Let’s say it’s in the dead of winter, and suddenly you see many people rushing to jump into the river, with smiles on their faces. Wouldn’t you feel curious?”

Wan Xiang and Wan Chuanzi nodded. “Master, you’re truly remarkable. Now we understand.”

“In short, it’s just playing on people’s curiosity. It’s just a gimmick,” Yan Ge said.

Back at Yan Mansion, Yan Xiaojing and Madam Yan were sitting solemnly at the upper seat in the main hall. Yan Su was also sitting on the side, wearing a stern expression, resembling a judge in court. Apart from them, there were no servants or maidservants In the hall, not even the loyal Butler Yan Fu.

Yan Ge walked over with a smile. “Father, mother, elder brother, why is everyone so serious?”

Yan Xiaojing’s face turned stern, and he slammed his right palm forcefully on the table, causing the teacups to jump. “Speak! What exactly happened?” No wonder during the morning court, he felt that the Emperor’s gaze held a deeper meaning.

“Second brother, you’re finally back. We’ve all been waiting for you,” Yan Su gestured for Yan Ge to take a seat.

Yan Xiaojing and Yan Su heard that Yan Ge had left the palace and their expressions changed drastically. Madam Yan started to worry again. “Ge’er, can you finally explain everything now? Your father and your elder brother have been very worried about you.”

Yan Ge maintained his smile. He looked at Wan Xiang and Wan Chuanzi. “Go to the kitchen and check if the food is ready. I’m starving.”

“Yes.”

After the two left, Yan Ge’s expression turned serious. “Father, this is what happened yesterday…”

After listening to his words, Yan Xiaojing’s eyes rolled, almost passing out from anger. He pointed at Yan Ge, trembling with rage. “You…you..what did you say?!”

He suddenly turned to Madam Yan and Yan Su, shouting loudly, “You keep telling me how sensible he has become, but I see him becoming more and more willful and presumptuous! He even dares to make deals with the Emperor and negotiate conditions! He’s almost poking holes in the sky!”

Madam Yan and Yan Su were looking at Yan Ge in astonishment, and were startled by Yan Xiaojing’s outburst.

“Ge’er, how can you act so recklessly…” Madam Yan anxiously tightened her handkerchief, abruptly standing up.

Yan Xiaojing was so angry that he was muttering, “crazy!” several times.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun finally understood what had happened between Yan Ge and the Emperor, and they secretly admired Yan Ge’s courage. To make deals with the Emperor, Yan Ge was truly a unique individual throughout history.

Yan Jin(the system) mumbled softly, “Master, your father is terrifying.”

Yan Ge chuckled inwardly. With a serious expression, he said to Yan Xiaojing, “Father, I haven’t acted foolishly. Please listen to me and let me

finish.”

Yan Xiaojing was breathing heavily with anger, and glaring at him fiercely. The situation had already been decided. What difference would it make if he didn’t listen to Yan Ge’s explanation?

“Speak! I want to see what you have to say.”

“Father, the son’s life in the palace…” Yan Ge intentionally spoke vaguely at the crucial point, guiding Yan Xiaojing and the others to think in a negative direction with a troubled expression. “The Emperor favors the female consorts, and the other three male consorts are outstanding. The son’s position is very awkward. Can the son live like this forever? The son thought, since the son likes business, why not use it to solidify his position in the palace? That way, even if the son is never favored by the Emperor in his lifetime, at least he can seek stability. What’s more important is that he can share the Emperor’s worries, just as you often say, ‘serve the court.’ Why not do it?”

Yan Xiaojing’s gaze flickered over Gao Feng and Gao Yun, and he sighed inwardly. He had been immersed in the officialdom for many years and was not as naïve as Madam Yan. Gao Feng and Gao Yun were the sons of Gao Jingwei, the Minister of Works, and they enjoyed the Emperor’s trust. Now they were assigned to Yan Ge’s side, while Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi were dismissed, which was obviously abnormal.

Yan Su also sensed something and gave Yan Ge a reproachful look.

For a moment, Yan Xiaojing and Yan Su remained silent.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun noticed the tense atmosphere but couldn’t leave. They could only pretend not to know and look straight ahead.

“Father, trust me. I never fight battles I’m not sure of.” Yan Ge knew what they were worried about and walked behind Yan Xiaojing with a smiling face, massaging his shoulders. “By the way, I need to talk to you about something concerning Liuxian Pavilion. Let’s discuss it over our meal. I’m starving.”

Yan Xiaojing glanced at him and snorted heavily before standing up. “Do you think doing business is as easy as you imagine? You’ll suffer in the end! Everyone, let’s eat. I don’t want to bother with him!”

Yan Ge continued to smile and walked with him, occasionally patting Yan Xiaojing’s back, making Yan Xiaojing both amused and annoyed.

Madam Yan and Yan Su shook their heads while watching from behind.

The Yan family of four sat at a table, with Butler Yan Fu accompanying Gao Feng and Gao Yun at an additional table. Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi sat with them as well.

Yan Su observed that Yan Ge talked to Gao Feng and Gao Yun without any reservation, and there was no sign of reluctance in his expression. He couldn’t help but admire his brother’s courage. This brother had changed so much compared to before. It seemed that the palace was truly the place that could change a person the most, allowing him to grow so quickly. He only hoped that Yan Ge wouldn’t shoot himself in the foot.

As an older brother, he couldn’t resist giving Yan Ge a punch on the shoulder as a lesson.

Yan Ge had strengthened his body from practising and didn’t feel pain or discomfort. He arranged the dishes for Madam Yan and began discussing Liuxian Pavilion. “Today at Liuxian Pavilion…”

“Is there such a thing?” Yan Xiaojing furrowed his brows.

Yan Ge smiled. “Actually, this situation was expected. The problems today are just minor. In the future, there might be more issues, such as kickbacks, substandard quality, false accounts, and even recipe leaks.”

Yan Xiaojing and Yan Su’s expressions grew more serious.

“Recipe leaks?”

“Has the secret leaked?”

He filled their wine glasses, “Father, elder brother, my intention is not to imply that the people you have found are unreliable, but rather that the speed at which Liuxian is growing is too rapid, and the coordination among various aspects is not yet perfect, making it prone to problems. If not addressed in a timely manner, as time goes on, the frequency of leaks will increase.”

“For the restaurant matters, it’s not appropriate for either me or your elder brother to intervene too much,” Yan Xiaojing also hesitated. Both he and Yan Su had scholarly backgrounds, and they held official positions, which indeed made it difficult for them to handle business matters.

Madam Yan, being a virtuous woman, had only partial understanding of business matters and did not interject.

Yan Su looked at Yan Ge, “Do you have any ideas?”

Yan Ge nodded, “Indeed, I have some ideas, but there are still some details that need to be considered thoroughly. In the future, I will be able to leave the palace every day. Father, elder brother, if you trust me, you can entrust the matters of Liuxian Pavilion to me.”

Yan Xiaojing looked at Yan Su. He wasn’t particularly concerned about Liuxian Pavilion. After all, Liuxian Pavilion would eventually belong to the two brothers.

Yan Su nodded without hesitation, “Liuxian Pavilion should have been yours from the beginning. There’s nothing to worry about if it’s handled by you.”

Yan Ge smiled and shook his head. He had long made up his mind. Since he was tied to the Yan family and Yan Xiaojing, Yan Ge considered them his true family. Regardless of his own industries, he would allocate a share to Yan Su. However, actions spoke louder than words, and it was too early to talk about these things now.

“Let’s not discuss this for now. Once I’ve made my decision, I will explain how to handle the matters to you,” Yan Ge stood up and poured a glass of

wine for Yan Xiaojing, Yan Su, and Madam Yan, respectively. “Father, mother, elder brother, I have truly grown up. I understand that some of my decisions seem unimaginable to others, but I have confidence in handling these matters well. The only thing you need to do is believe in me.”

Yan Xiaojing, Yan Su, and Madam Yan exchanged glances, all smiling, and raised their glasses simultaneously. Yan Ge had already “married” and even held the position of a palace consort. His future path would primarily rely on his own efforts.

“At this point, what difference does it make if we believe in you or not?” Yan Xiaojing reprimanded in a rough tone, but his eyes were kind.

“Thank you, Father, Mother, Elder Brother!” Yan Ge also smiled, feeling grateful for their acceptance. Unexpectedly, the warmth he couldn’t obtain in modern times was now experienced in this unfamiliar era.

MCUS Chapter 26

After finishing lunch and spending some time with Yan Xiaojing and Madam Yan, Yan Ge left with Gao Feng and the others to start the production of the fountain pen. He preferred a signing pen, but the fine and delicate nature of the pen nib, especially the tip, required highly skilled craftsmanship that was unlikely to be found in this era. So he had to settle for a fountain pen.

“Gao Feng, Gao Yun, please inquire about the best blacksmith shop in the city,” Yan Ge leaned against the window and instructed the two who were sitting up front. They were casually moving through the bustling city, with the carriage and horses moving at a leisurely pace.

“Yes.”

Gao Feng and Gao Yun pulled the reins and went to ask the shop owners on the roadside. They soon returned, urging the horses to a stop two streets away from their destination.

“Master, it’s just ahead. Allow us to lead the way,” Gao Feng informed, while Gao Yun nodded in agreement.

The carriage stopped in front of “Old Li’s blacksmith shop”. The shop door was wide open, and a muscular man with a bearded face was hammering iron, creating a rhythmic and melodic sound. Sweat dripped onto the glowing iron block, sizzling upon impact.

Gao Feng instructed Xiao Shuanzi to keep an eye on the horses and the carriage.

Yan Ge entered the shop and examined the various iron tools displayed on the shelves. There were sickles, scissors, iron shovels, hoes, knives, swords,

daggers, and more, all finely crafted. However, he couldn't find any small objects, which left him somewhat disappointed, fearing that this trip might be in vain.

Old Li glanced at the group but didn't think they were customers who needed personal attention. He continued to hammer away without paying them much mind.

The shop was hot and stuffy due to the forge, so Wan Xiang picked up a large palm-leaf fan from the nearby table and began fanning Yan Ge.

Yan Ge took a seat on an empty chair and gestured to Xiao Chuanzi. Xiao Chuanzi placed twelve taels of silver on the table.

Old Li's eyes flickered, and he finally stopped what he was doing. He wiped the sweat from his brow and spoke in a straightforward manner, "I don't know what kind of iron tools this young master wants. But here, there's nothing I can't forge."

"Oh?" Yan Ge smiled, delighted to hear those words. "What I need is something very small. I hope Master Li won't overpromise."

Old Li looked proud. "No matter how small it is, it can't be smaller than a needle, right?"

Yan Ge was momentarily stunned, but quickly smiled. "Indeed, it won't be smaller than that. I have a drawing. If Master Li can't make it, the drawing must not be leaked, otherwise, I'm afraid…"

Gao Yun's mind was quick, and he took out the token of the imperial guard and showed it to him, causing Old Li's expression to change slightly.

Yan Ge continued, "If you can make it, not only will you receive a generous reward, but you will also earn merit."

After a moment of surprise, Old Li became interested. "Really?"

Only then did Yan Ge present the drawing. "Take a look at this first. See if you can make it according to the drawing, and it would be best if it matches

the size exactly."

After carefully examining the drawing, Old Li pointed to a particular part. "Is this a hole?"

"Yes, this is a pen, superior to a brush, and you can write after putting ink into a thin tube." Old Li nodded his head and Yan Ge explained in detail, "This is the tip of the pen, have you noticed the holes and gaps in the middle? This is where the ink comes out. The straw is to hold the ink…"

Gao Feng and Gao Yun stared at Yan Ge in astonishment. If this pen was successfully made, not only will it be a great achievement, but it will also be a great merit to all scholars in the world!

Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi remained relatively calm, but their shimmering eyes revealed their equally unsettled emotions.

Old Li glanced at Yan Ge in surprise, then lowered his head to ponder for a while, "It's possible to create, but…."

Yan Ge took over his sentence: "But the ink will cause rust on the pen nib, affecting the ink flow. Is that correct?"

Old Li nodded, "So the young master has also considered this."

"Therefore, I require your assistance in finding a way to slow down the rusting of the metal tip of the pen, at least ensuring that it remains rust-free for a year. Alternatively, you can explore alternative materials that are durable and can replace iron. As a blacksmith, your knowledge in this area surpasses mine." Yan Ge glanced at Xiao Chuanzi.

Xiao Chuanzi presented another ten taels of silver.

Yan Ge continued, "I permit you to discuss or collaborate with other skilled artisans in this field, on the condition that the nature of this new pen is not revealed. Alternatively, you may recommend more suitable talents to me. Once successful, you will all receive ample rewards. Our dynasty places

great importance on literature, and this achievement will be a great contribution. Master Li should understand the significance, right?”

Old Li’s eyes betrayed his interest. After hesitating for a moment, he clenched his teeth and agreed, “I’ll do it!” His ancestors had been craftsmen for four generations, but they hadn’t achieved much. If he could earn this honor, it would bring glory to his ancestors and perhaps even bestow blessings upon his descendants.

Yan Ge reminded him, “Because the size of this straw must be compatible with the core, that task will also fall to you. It requires high flexibility and must not leak. Finding a material that meets these conditions may not be easy. Have you considered it carefully?”

Old Li replied, “That shouldn’t be difficult. Crow intestines, when dried and soaked, become quite flexible and meet the requirements for this pen.”

“Excellent.” Yan Ge was very satisfied with this trip. “Produce a finished product as soon as possible for me to examine. We can address any issues with the details later.”

“Rest assured, I’m confident.” Li nodded firmly.

“Very well, I’ll give you three days. Is that acceptable?” Yan Ge asked.

“No problem.”

“Three days from now, I will return.”

After walking a few steps away from the blacksmith’s shop, Yan Ge said to Gao Feng, “You’ll need to keep a close eye on Master Li for these three days.”

Gao Feng was puzzled. “Do you think he might take the money and run?”

Yan Ge shook his head. “No, it’s not that. The matter of the fountain pen is confidential and of great importance. If the design is stolen and someone else produces the pen first, it’s a minor issue if they make money from it. But if foreign spies obtain it, the losses will be irreparable. I don’t want to

see our great Han Kingdom's invention made by people from other countries. Be cautious."

Gao Feng was impressed by the awareness he showed at such a young age and admitted, "You have great foresight, far beyond our abilities. I will do my best. You can rest assured that Old Li won't discover my surveillance." With that, he turned around and headed back, leading the horse that Gao Yun held.

Xiao Chuanzi asked with worry, "Master, the Emperor only gave you half a month. Wouldn't it be better to find more blacksmiths for a greater chance of success?"

Wan Xiang gave him a disdainful look. "The more people who know about the design, the higher the risk of it being leaked."

Yan Ge praised her, "Wan Xiang, you've made great progress. Xiao Chuanzi, you'll have to work harder. By the way, Xiao Chuanzi, to avoid others suspecting that you came from the palace, I will now call you Xiao Chuan. Let's make sure we don't make any mistakes."

It was difficult to conceal the characteristics of a eunuch.

"Thank you, master!" Xiao Chuanzi was so grateful that his eyes turned red, and he swore in his heart that he would always be loyal to his master.

Gao Yun watched from the side, wondering how many amazing things this Yan Daying would let him see.

MCUS Chapter 27

After leaving the blacksmith's shop, Yan Ge instructed Xiao Shuanzi to drive the carriage along the bustling streets of the capital.

It was May, just past noon, and the temperature was not low. Apart from Yan Ge and Gao Yun, who knew how to regulate their body temperature using internal energy, Wan Xiang, Xiao Chuanzi, and Xiao Shuanzi were all sweating profusely. However, none of them complained, although they were unsure why their master was wandering around like this. Along the way, they stopped three times to drink chilled tea and gave water to the horses twice.

Yan Ge had an idea for a business opportunity and asked Yan Jin to make a note of it.

"Let's go to Fulu Street again."

Gao Yun couldn't help but ask, "Master, what are you looking for? I am quite familiar with the capital."

Yan Ge smiled and shook his head. "I'm searching for a business opportunity. Keep going."

The carriage passed by a women's clothing store, and he asked Xiao Shuanzi to stop the carriage and he walked in. Wan Xiang and the others were all puzzled.

The clothing store was doing well, with people everywhere selecting garments. Yan Ge was about to closely examine a particular item when a young man in embroidered clothes, who was holding a young woman, suddenly stepped back and accidentally stepped on Yan Ge's foot,

stumbling for a moment. The man turned around and glared at Yan Ge unfriendly. “Are you blind?”

Yan Ge’s eyebrows arched, and his smile deepened.

Wan Xiang and Xiao Shuanzi clenched their fists, ready to rush forward. A hand reached out and grabbed the young man’s wrist, twisting it without hesitation.

“Ah! Let go, let go!” The man winced in pain, his eyebrows almost touching, and turned his head to see Gao Yun. He was surprised and asked, “Gao Yun?” His gaze drifted towards Yan Ge, who was casually fanning himself with a folding fan.

Who was this boy?

“Liu Shaoling, be careful!” Gao Yun forcefully pushed him away, gave him a sharp look, and whispered to Yan Ge, “Master, Liu Shaoling is the son of Duke Lu. It’s best not to provoke him.” This was a reminder to Yan Ge that Liu Shaoling’s status was extraordinary, and it would be wise not to easily offend him.

Liu Shaoling rubbed his wrist, speculating on Yan Ge’s identity. They were all young nobles in the capital, and he knew that Gao Yun was an imperial guard. The person who could receive such respectful treatment from him was certainly not ordinary.

He respectfully bowed to Yan Ge and said, “This one was blind. May I know how to address this young master? They say there’s no better way to make amends than by being of service. Can I make amends for my mistake?”

Yan Ge glanced at him indifferently, nodded slightly, and said, “No need to trouble yourself.” He walked to the side to closely examine the clothing of this era.

Liu Shaoling grew even more curious about Yan Ge’s identity and looked at Gao Yun, gesturing with his eyes for an explanation.

Gao Yun gave him a warning look and ignored him, walking to Yan Ge's side.

Left with no other choice, Liu Shaoling walked away resentfully, secretly observing them.

Yan Ge quickly finished looking at the clothing in the store and had gained a general understanding. "Let's go."

The carriage went directly to Liuxian Pavilion.

The palace was some distance from the city center. It was already six o'clock, and it was time to prepare to return to the palace. Looking at the situation in the hall, most of the seats were already occupied and judging by the expression of Manager Yuan, it was probably not as good as usual.

Yan Ge didn't want too many people to know about his relationship with Liuxian Pavilion, so he didn't go personally. Instead, he sent Xiao Chuanzi to inquire about the situation.

Xiao Chuanzi quickly returned with a response. Manager Yuan was indeed a talented person. After obtaining the recipe for aromatic pork chops from Yan Ge, he immediately instructed the head chef to work on it. At the same time, he selected a few smart and thick-skinned assistants to carry embroidered banners with promotional slogans and walk along the busiest streets of the city, while beating gongs and drums. The effect was quite good.

Yan Ge said to Xiao Chuanzi, "Go and tell Manager Yuan that today is only the first day, and there will definitely be noticeable changes tomorrow and the day after. Let him rest assured."

After dinner, he personally supervised the preparation of the aromatic pork chops and had them packed for takeaway.

He then went directly back to the palace, urging the horse to gallop faster on the less crowded streets and arrived before the palace gates were closed.

After Yan Ge entered the Tenglong Palace, Gao Yun left. His exquisite lightness skill allowed him to blend into the darkness like a wisp of smoke.

Yan Ge instructed Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi to return to Luoxue Palace first, while he carried the food container and arrived outside Huangfu Yuchen's sleeping quarters. He said to the guards, "Go and inform the Emperor that Yan Daying requests to meet him."

The guard quickly came out and said, "The Emperor has summoned Yan Daying to enter. Please go on."

When Yan Ge entered, Huangfu Yuchen was reviewing a memorial at his desk, and Deng Mande was quietly standing by his side. The hall was filled with invigorating incense, and the light and refreshing fragrance was pleasant.

"This servant pays respects to the Emperor. May the Emperor be blessed."

Huangfu Yuchen looked up and on seeing the clothes Yan Ge was wearing, his expression became displeased. "You came here like this? What kind of appearance is this?"

Yan Ge replied, "This servant brought a delicious dish from outside the palace for the Emperor. Fearing it would get cold, I came to pay respects to the Emperor as soon as possible and didn't have time to change clothes. Please pardon me, Your Majesty."

"Oh?" Huangfu Yuchen looked at him with a smile that was not quite a smile, but he didn't scold him. "It seems like you've been quite leisurely outside the palace? Yan Daying, do you know that the palace is very lively today, and everyone is talking about you?

"I will only know after listening to the emperor." Yan Ge's expression remained unchanged.

"You don't seem to be worried at all?" Huangfu Yuchen looked at him deeply.

MCUS Chapter 28

Yan Ge expressed his loyalty smoothly, “The move to the Tenglong Palace was Your Majesty’s will. This servant only needs to understand the underlying reasons behind Your Majesty’s decision. As for others with doubts, this servant has no authority over them.” He was not in the palace during the day, and after returning, he came to the “thigh’s” Tenglong Palace, so he was not afraid of someone causing trouble for him.

Deng Mande caressed the whisk in his hand and secretly praised. ‘This dragon fart is well done.’

Huangfu Yuchen smiled and remained silent, it was unknown what he was thinking.

Yan Ge handed the food container to Deng Mande, saying, “This dish was a recipe I came up with on a whim and I personally supervised its preparation.” Since he aimed to cling to the thigh, he had to constantly make Emperor Huangfu Yuchen feel his favor, so that he could hold onto him tightly.

Deng Mande looked at Huangfu Yuchen. After Huangfu Yuchen nodded, Deng Mande took the food container, revealed the contents inside, and carefully placed a pair of chopsticks and a small plate on the side. He took a silver needle to test for poison, ensuring that the silver needle did not change color. Then he personally picked up a piece of ribs and placed it in the small plate, tasted it, and only after not feeling any discomfort did he take the dish and place it in front of Huangfu Yuchen, fetching Huangfu Yuchen’s special tableware.

Huangfu Yuchen could already smell the fragrant and slightly sweet aroma. He tasted a piece of pork chop and found it tender and succulent, with an

excellent texture. He smiled in satisfaction and said, “Yan Daying has put thought into this. You are pardoned for your dress code. You may rise. This fragrance has a fruity note, but it doesn’t seem like fruit juice has been added. It’s quite distinct.”

Yan Ge smiled and replied, “Your Majesty is wise. This dish is called Fragrant Aromatic Pork Chop. It’s true that it doesn’t have any fruit juice added, however, it was carefully smoked with high-quality fruitwood, hence it has absorbed the fragrance of the fruitwood. The well-balanced aroma doesn’t overpower the natural meaty fragrance of the pork chop, but adds a unique sensation.”

Deng Mande’s mouth watered as he listened.

Huangfu Yuchen lifted his chopsticks gracefully and had another bite of the pork chop.

Yan Ge presented the recipe.

Huangfu Yuchen was in a good mood. He put down his chopsticks and, in a rare instance, took the initiative to inquire, “Has everything gone smoothly today?”

“There was a minor issue at Liuxian Pavilion,” Yan Ge knelt down, “This servant has a matter to discuss with Your Majesty.”

‘Sure enough, the Fragrant Aromatic Pork Chop was not free.’ Huangfu Yuchen secretly thought.

Deng Mande had long been numb to Yan Ge’s audacity and remained expressionless.

“Rise and speak,” Huangfu Yuchen said, “What do you want to discuss? If it’s about borrowing money, forget it.”

Yan Ge was momentarily taken aback, feeling somewhat helpless, “It’s not about borrowing money. Your Majesty, Liuxian Pavilion offers dishes that other restaurants lack, and its development potential is vast. It is entirely

possible to open another branch in the capital, or even expand Liuxian Pavilion to other provincial capitals. However, as you know, I don't have enough manpower—"

He spoke so smoothly and forgot to address himself as "this servant."

Seeing that Huangfu Yuchen didn't show any signs of being offended, he happily pretended to be clueless and continued, "My idea is, why not collaborate with Your Majesty? I provide the recipes, and Your Majesty provides the personnel. The annual income of all Liuxian Pavilion branches nationwide, after deducting necessary expenses, will be divided into ten portions, with a 4-6 split between Your Majesty and me. Of course, I will take four, and Your Majesty will take six portions." His pair of smiling eyes gazed at Huangfu Yuchen, displaying exceptional sincerity.

Huangfu Yuchen found it amusing, and a faint smile glimmered in his eyes, but his tone remained cold, "I provide the personnel, and you get four portions without doing anything?"

"You are mistaken, Your Majesty," Yan Ge replied solemnly, "Creating the recipes also requires great effort."

Huangfu Yuchen asked calmly, "But didn't you produce over a hundred recipes effortlessly?"

Yan Ge had anticipated this question and was prepared. Without changing his expression, he promptly knelt down solidly and said, "To answer Your Majesty, it is…"

However, Huangfu Yuchen interrupted him, saying, "Eight portions for me, two for you. Otherwise, let's not discuss it. I cannot personally undertake this matter, so I will delegate it to someone else. At that time, two portions will be allocated from my share and given to him."

Huangfu Yuchen didn't allow Yan Ge to explain further, which made Yan Ge feel somewhat uneasy. He could sense that this man was unfathomable, and he needed to be extremely cautious when dealing with him. However, for some reason, this sense of crisis ignited his blood and excitement surged

within him, like encountering a worthy opponent in a game of chess. Therefore, he quickly pushed aside his unease and regained his composure.

He calculated in his mind that if everything went smoothly, opening two more branches in the capital alone could earn him 360,000 taels in a year. If he received a 20% share, it would be over 70,000 taels, not to mention that there would definitely be more than two Liuxian Pavilion branches nationwide.

He readily agreed, but on the surface, he had to show a hint of reluctance. He couldn't let Huangfu Yuchen think he was easy to manipulate, otherwise, Huangfu Yuchen would surely exert more pressure on him.

He once again expressed his gratitude and stood up.

Huangfu Yuchen shook his head slightly and said, "No need to kneel every time you see me. You've knelt four or five times in such a short period. Aren't you tired? I feel tired for you."

Yan Ge immediately stood up and replied with a loud voice, "Thank you for your grace, Your Majesty!"

Though Huangfu Yuchen didn't smile on his face, the curvature of his lips and eyebrows seemed to carry a smile. HH suddenly felt that he had been deceived, so he stared intently into Yan Ge's eyes but found only innocence.

Yan Ge pretended to be oblivious. He firmly refused to admit that it was a deliberate calculation. What could Huangfu Yuchen do to him anyway? He certainly couldn't force him to confess.

"Your Majesty, may I borrow the writing materials?"

Huangfu Yuchen didn't object, so Yan Ge assumed his consent. He walked to the edge of the desk, picked up the brush, and swiftly wrote a few lines, then handed it to Huangfu Yuchen. "Your Majesty, please stamp on it."

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at it and saw the detailed date and agreement reached with the Emperor, stating that 80% of Liuxian Pavilion's income

would be donated to the national treasury. Implicitly, this meant that the 80% profit sharing had to be accounted for within the 200,000 taels they had agreed upon yesterday.

A barely noticeable twitch appeared on Huangfu Yuchen's forehead. He cast a sidelong glance at Yan Ge and spoke in a deep voice, "Do you think I would covet this 80% silver?"

Yan Ge replied sincerely, "Absolutely not. It's just for the convenience of bookkeeping."

Huangfu Yuchen stared at him for a long time, his gaze inscrutable. Eventually, he took the seal and stamped it on the document.

Deng Mande looked at Yan Ge with shining eyes and silently reminded himself to establish a good relationship with this man. He was undoubtedly the most favored figure in the palace!

"Thank you, Your Majesty!" Yan Ge quickly blew the seal dry and carefully folded the paper before tucking it into his sleeve and putting it the system backpack.

Feeling that he had been somewhat on the losing end tonight, Huangfu Yuchen shifted his thoughts and asked in a dignified manner, "How is the matter with the new pen progressing?"

MCUS Chapter 29

Yan Ge said, “If everything goes smoothly, we’ll be able to see the finished product in a few days.”

Huangfu Yuchen asked, “Now that you’ve essentially handed over Liuxian Pavilion, how do you plan to earn those 200,000 taels?”

“This servant was about to bring up this matter with the Emperor,” Yan Ge smiled confidently and continued, “Today, while wandering through the city, this servant noticed that there is a considerable influx of people from outside the capital. Whether they come to sightsee, settle down, or do business, they all need to find suitable places. However, there is no comprehensive map available to guide them. This gave me the idea of commissioning someone to create a detailed map of the capital, marking all the buildings within it. The map can be divided into two levels. One would be simple, mainly targeting ordinary people, especially scholars who come from other provinces to study or take examinations. Our dynasty values culture, so with this opportunity, this servant is more than willing to lend a hand to the scholars. The price for this type of map would be set at 6 to 8 coins, which most people can afford. The other level would be more exquisite and specifically targeted at wealthy individuals, with prices set at 2 taels or even higher.”

Deng Mande’s hands trembled, and the whisk in his hand fell to the ground. His eyes sparkled as he stared fixedly at Yan Ge. Was this still a human? He was like a golden Buddha, casually coming up with such a brilliant money-making idea after just strolling around the city!

Huangfu Yuchen appeared calm. He took a sip of tea, and said, “In that case, I only need to receive 50% of the profits from this map. You no longer have to address yourself as ‘servant’ in front of me.”

First, fleece him thoroughly, then offer him a bait. He wasn't afraid that Yan Ge wouldn't take the bait. Yan Daying often forgot and referred to himself as 'I,' how could he not see that he disliked that form of address?

Yan Ge cursed Huangfu Yuchen in his heart for being cunning, but on the surface, he feigned helplessness. "Do you really value such a small amount of money, Your Majesty? I'm just earning some pocket money… If I had known, I wouldn't have mentioned it. With your level of exploitation, when will I ever earn those 200,000 taels?"

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled inwardly and maintained a serious expression, giving a lecture. "What's small money? There's no distinction in the value of money. Let me teach you a principle: small amounts add up to a large sum. Once you have enough small amounts, they become a significant sum."

Yan Ge struggled desperately. "Your Majesty, I also need capital to do business."

Huangfu Yuchen knew that Yan Ge had become vigilant this time, so it wouldn't be easy to take advantage of him in the future. He didn't plan to back down and generously said, "Shall I lend you 10,000 taels from my private treasury? Would that be enough?"

Yan Ge cautiously asked, "Will interest be charged?"

Deng Mande could barely contain his laughter. His facial muscles twitched uncontrollably.

Huangfu Yuchen was afraid of hitting him hard, so he waved his hand. "No, no interest."

Yan Ge breathed a sigh of relief. The Yan family had been officials for generations, and they were honest officials at that. It was impossible for them to come up with too much silver and gold. He was worried about funds, and Huangfu Yuchen finally did something good.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. It’s late now. Yan Daying takes his leave and won’t disturb Your Majesty’s rest.”

Seeing his slightly frustrated appearance, Huangfu Yuchen finally felt satisfied. “Hmm. I will have someone send the silver to you. Write a promissory note and don’t forget to stamp it.”

Yan Ge: “…”

After he disappeared, a person walked out from an inconspicuous side door. It was Gao Yun.

“This subordinate pay my respects to Your Majesty.”

“Hmm,” Huangfu Yuchen’s lips still carried a trace of a smile, “Sit down and talk.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Gao Yun calmly said after sitting down, “After leaving the palace today, Yan Daying went to Yan Residence first… and then…”

“Wait,” Huangfu Yuchen interrupted after awhile, “So, every time he orders you and Gao Feng to do something, he leaves one of you by his side?”

“Exactly,” said Gao Yun. “After returning to Yan Mansion, Yan Daying explained the matter of leaving the palace to the Yan family. He sent Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi away, but kept me and Feng.”

Deng Mande and the emperor had a close relationship, so he dared to interject even in informal situations. He sighed and said, “Yan Daying is a truly extraordinary person.”

Huangfu Yuchen smiled but remained silent, gesturing with his eyes for Gao Yun to continue.

“…Yan Daying said, ‘The matter of the fountain pen is confidential and of great importance. If the design plans were stolen and someone else made the fountain pen and earned money from it, it would be a minor issue. But if it fell into the hands of spies from another country, the loss would be

irreparable. I don’t want to see our Great Han’s invention being made by people from other countries. Be cautious, but not overly so.’”

Only now did a look of admiration appear on Huangfu Yuchen’s face. If he remembered correctly, Yan Ge was just eighteen years old. Since he knew that Gao Feng and Gao Yun were his eyes and ears, saying those words might not be without flattery. However, it was remarkable that he could think about national affairs based on such a small matter, considering his age.

He remained silent for a while before saying, “Continue.”

Speaking of Yan Ge, not long after returning to Luoxue Palace, he received a silver ticket of ten thousand taels sent by Huangfu Yuchen’s men, as well as a blank paper indicating that he borrowed ten thousand taels. He cursed under his breath and had to press a red handprint on it.

After practicing swordplay as usual and washing up, he relaxed and lay down on the bed, stretching his body. It had been a tiring but fulfilling day. He enjoyed this kind of busy life because it left him no time to think about the person from another time and space. His consciousness gradually blurred, and with a sigh, he fell into a dreamland…

In his dream, he made money, and piles of silver formed a mountain. He was happily sitting on the silver mountain when suddenly a person arrived with a large group of people. Some were holding iron shovels, some holding sickles, some holding hoes, and some holding axes. Without a word, they began to dig into his silver mountain. He stood up to resist, but the leader of the group smiled at him and gave him a broken chair. That man then sat in the position where he had been sitting. He looked closely and realized that the person had the exact same face as Huangfu Yuchen!

Then, he was awakened abruptly. He made a vow never to reveal his money-making plan to Huangfu Yuchen, even if it cost him his life.

A faint light seeped in from the window, indicating that it was almost time to leave the palace.

As he hurriedly left the palace with Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi, coincidentally, he saw Huangfu Yuchen walking towards him. It seemed that Huangfu Yuchen was in a good mood, with a smile on both corners of his mouth and a leisurely pace. Yan Ge even wondered if he had the same dream as him.

Upon seeing Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen was slightly surprised, but his smile quickly grew more pronounced.

“Yan Ge greets the emperor, may you be blessed,” Yan Ge’s smile seemed a bit forced after the dream he had last night.

“Ding. Side mission: Give the emperor a hug. Completing the mission successfully will earn you 100 taels of silver and a silver chest as rewardz. Failure to complete the mission results in a deduction of 100 taels of silver. Mission time: 2 minutes. Accept the mission, select ‘yes.’ Decline the mission, select ‘no.’”

Yan Ge’s mouth fell open in surprise. Give the emperor a hug? Was this system playing tricks on him?

“Xiao Jin!”

“Master, I swear I am innocent!” Yan Jin hurriedly explained in a flustered manner, and then actively added, “However, Master, I still advise you to accept it. A hug in exchange for a silver chest is incredibly worthwhile!”

“Your Majesty, you work so hard. Do you have to get up early every day?” Yan Ge hesitated, engaging in idle chatter with Huangfu Yuchen while quickly analyzing the situation. Judging from the rewards obtained from the first side mission, there was a high probability that the second silver chest would contain even better treasures.

However, Huangfu Yuchen was no ordinary person; he was the emperor and didn’t like men. Yan Ge feared that if he hugged Huangfu Yuchen in front of so many people, he would be kicked three miles away.

That is, unless he could find a “legitimate” reason to embrace him.

Perhaps if he accidentally stumbled and fell towards Huangfu Yuchen? Unfortunately, the place where the most esteemed person in the world—the emperor—resided, could not possibly be uneven. It was not easy to fall naturally and gracefully.

Huangfu Yuchen, as a high-ranking individual, rarely heard such casual and idle words from others. He looked at Yan Ge in surprise, unhappy with this attempt to get close, and responded with a cold and indifferent “Hmm,” before taking a step forward.

He also wondered why every time he started to develop some goodwill towards Yan Ge, he would do something that made him feel repulsed.

“Your Majesty.”

Reluctant to give up the silver chest, Yan Ge called out and took a few quick steps, raising his arms, and making a bold decision.

Huangfu Yuchen turned his head, and Yan Ge unintentionally looked into his deep eyes, becoming absent-minded for a moment.

Huangfu Yuchen looked at Yan Ge, who had raised his arms as if to hug him, with suspicion. He noticed the reluctance in Yan Ge’s gaze, and averted his gaze.

Yan Ge swiftly lowered his arms and said, “The morning court is imminent. I will take my leave.” He then briskly walked away.

Huangfu Yuchen stood in place for a moment, dazed, before moving forward.

Deng Mande secretly sympathized with Yan Ge.

It seemed that Yan Daying silently harbored affection for the emperor and had fallen deeply. His offer to trade and even replenish the treasury for the emperor was all for the sake of creating more opportunities to be with him. Yan Daying had concealed his feelings for the emperor all along but couldn’t hold back today, nearly impulsively embracing the emperor. Such

deep affection in the palace was truly rare and precious! Unfortunately, the emperor simply did not like men. Yan Daying had no hope at all.

Yan Ge had no idea that his actions had been completely misunderstood. He was currently asking Yan Jin, “Is there a deadline for side missions?”

He believed that if he spent more time with Huangfu Yuchen, he would dare to embrace him.

Yan Jin sadly replied, “Side missions are randomly triggered and have a time limit. Once you separate from the emperor, it is equivalent to rejecting the mission. Therefore, not accepting it is the same as missing out.”

Yan Ge glanced at the task bar and indeed, the side mission was no longer there. He felt a bit regretful but quickly let it go. After all, completing the main mission was the priority.

Xiao Chuanzi’s voice brought him back to his senses. “Young Master, what shall we do today?”

Xiao Chuanzi and Wan Xiang were both in high spirits, their morale soaring. They had learned quite a bit the previous day, though it was difficult to articulate exactly what they had learned.

However, they understood the essence of their newfound enlightenment and were eager to learn more. Moreover, the world beyond the palace was more captivating than within its icy confines. They preferred the outside world to the cold palace.

Yan Ge stated, “In the future, we will often have tasks to perform outside the palace and will need a place to rest. It would be best to purchase a courtyard, free from disturbance, for convenience in our work. Gao Yun, do you know where to rent a house?”

Gao Yun replied, “Yes, Yahang market.”

Yan Ge said, “Then let’s go to Yahang. Before that, we shall have breakfast and pay a visit to the blacksmith shop. It’s quite exhausting to keep an eye

on Master Li all day long so, Gao Yun, you will switch shifts with Gao Feng later."

Gao Yun hurriedly responded, "Thank you, Young Master, for your thoughtfulness."

Yan Ge waved his hand dismissively, "Just do your best in the future." He didn't utter any superfluous words. He believed that Gao Yun and Gao Feng had their own sense of balance within their hearts. He didn't expect unwavering loyalty from them, as long as they didn't deliberately cause for him trouble before Huangfu Yuchen.

MCUS Chapter 30

The carriage came to a halt several meters away from Old Li's blacksmith shop. Gao Feng, who was concealed on the opposite roof, caught sight of them. With a graceful leap, he soared like a black bird, landing soundlessly on the ground. He cautiously glanced around, ensuring no suspicious individuals took notice of him, before swiftly approaching the carriage window.

"Greetings, Young Master."

"How is the situation?" Yan Ge inquired.

Gao Feng replied, "Everything is normal. Boss Li has entrusted the other business in the blacksmith shop to his two assistants, and is focusing his entire attention on the 'main task.' He spends almost the entire day at home, tinkering and hammering away. I saw him fashioning a prototype from wood, and success is imminent."

"Oh?" Yan Ge rejoiced, secretly marveling at the skill of these ancient craftsmen. After considering for a moment, he decided it would be best not to meet with the blacksmith for now. It might only add pressure, which wouldn't be beneficial. He then said to Gao Feng, "You have diligently observed him throughout the day. I thank you for your hard work."

"You are too kind, Young Master. It is my duty," Gao Feng hurriedly responded.

"Gao Yun will take over for you. Tomorrow, you will switch with him. Although Master Li shows no signs of suspicion, we must not become complacent. Remain vigilant," Yan Ge instructed.

"Yes."

After Gao Yun respectfully bowed to Yan Ge, he walked to an inconspicuous corner and leaped onto the roof, bending his body like an agile black cat until he reached the spot where Gao Feng had previously stationed himself. It was the optimal observation position.

Gao Feng bought two pastries to fill their stomachs and accompanied Yan Ge to Yahang.

Yan Ge felt that he lacked manpower. Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi were young and had been in the palace for the past few years, without interacting with people outside the palace. He couldn't trust them to handle certain matters alone.

Sending Gao Feng was also not an option since Gao Feng was Huangfu Yuchen's spy and couldn't be moved away from his side. If he had enough subordinates, he could delegate some trivial tasks to them instead of personally attending to everything. Although there were some people in the Yan Mansion, it was currently inappropriate for him to have frequent contact with the mansion.

"Gao Yun, are there slave transactions at Yahang?"

Gao Yun replied, "Yes, young master."

"Are there any skilled fighters? Those with unique expertise?"

Gao Yun said, "Most of them have some skills, but the prices may vary."

The staff at Yahang had been in this line of work for a long time and had developed keen insight. As soon as they saw Yan Ge's distinguished appearance, accompanied by guards, maids, and servants, each with a different temperament, their eyes lit up. They quickly walked up to Yan Ge and led him to a chair, pouring him a cup of tea with calm and composed gestures. They said respectfully, "Young master, please feel free to give your orders."

Yan Ge opened his folding fan and waved it unhurriedly. "I heard that this is the largest market in the capital?"

The staff member beamed with pride. “Indeed. This is common knowledge. Whether you want someone old, young, male, or female, we have them all! I guarantee you’ll find a suitable one.”

Yan Ge smiled faintly, and those who knew him would detect the coldness in his smile. He was repulsed with the trade of human lives but this was a normal thing in this era. He had to adapt for survival. Suppressing his fleeting thoughts, he said, “Summon everyone here.”

The staff member hesitated, ”Everyone? That’s over a hundred people.”

Yan Ge’s folding fan paused for a moment.

Wan Xiang assumed a stern gaze, exuding an imposing manner, and placed a piece of silver on the table.

The staff member instantly smiled and ran off with the silver. “Please wait, young master .”

Before long, a group of people entered through a side door, one after another. They appeared somewhat dispirited, recognizing that Yan Ge might be the person who would purchase them. They walked over and stood in front of him. It was clear that this situation was not new to them. Nearly a hundred people filled the entire hall.

Only a few of them were tidy in appearance, while the majority seemed unkempt. These people were not bought by for their enjoyment, so they couldn’t expect to be treated well. As a result, the atmosphere in the hall became unpleasant.

Xiao Chuanzi couldn’t help but frown, afraid that they might crowd Yan Ge. He furrowed his brows and said, “Step back a bit.”

The staff member noticed and joined in, reprimanding them as if scolding livestock.

Yan Ge furrowed his brows and waved his hand to stop them.

The boss of Yahang, Fatty Jin, heard the commotion upstairs and estimated that it must be a major customer. However, he was also worried that the staff might mistake a pretentious person for a genuine nobleman. So, he came down as well.

When he saw Yan Ge's noble temperament, his heart settled, and he quickly walked over to greet him personally.

"I am Jin Defa, the owner of Quansheng Yahang Market. May I inquire about the honorable surname of the young master?"

Yan Ge revealed Madam Yan's maiden name, "Qin."

Jin Defa said, "So, you are Young Master Qin. May I know if you are interested in purchasing maids, cooks, or servants? And how many do you need?"

Yan Ge replied, "First, let the skilled fighters step forward."

Jin Defa signaled to his staff, "Did you hear that?"

The staff immediately shouted, "All skilled fighters, step forward."

Five or six people emerged from the crowd, including a woman who was dressed as a commoner in her thirties. She appeared simple yet tidy, with a calm expression and eyes devoid of any spark, as if hiding something deep within her heart.

Gao Feng was worried that Yan Ge might not understand the intricacies involved and didn't want to cross Yan Ge and ask Jin Defa. So, he said to Yan Ge, "Young master, perhaps we should also consider their backgrounds to avoid any potential complications."

Jin Defa hurriedly replied, "Absolutely not. They were all acquired through legitimate means, so there shouldn't be any issues. If they had problematic backgrounds, our Yahang wouldn't dare to purchase them. That would be inviting trouble."

Yan Ge said to Gao Feng, "You should first test their martial arts skills."

“Yes!”

Gao Feng walked over and said, “Follow me.”

The six individuals followed him.

Yan Ge also wanted to see Gao Feng’s abilities, so he followed them outside.

Jin Defa quickly caught up, realizing from Gao Feng’s demeanor that he was not an ordinary person. If Gao Feng ended up harming his people and not making a purchase, wouldn’t he suffer a significant loss?

MCUS Chapter 31

A person with martial arts skills can be considered to possess expertise. Gao Feng believed that someone like this shouldn’t have ended up at Yahang, and he held a hint of contempt in his heart as he said, “Attack together.”

Having experienced hunger and cold in Yahang, everyone hoped to be purchased and when they heard his words, they didn’t hesitate to launch a joint attack. Two of them only had basic martial arts knowledge and were quickly defeated by Gao Feng, retreating to the side in embarrassment. After a while, two more people withdrew.

The most impressive were the woman and a man who appeared to be in his mid-twenties, especially the woman. Gao Feng also felt the urge to test his skills and used seventy percent of his strength to subdue her.

Yan Ge wore a surprised expression at this moment, but his astonishment was not due to the appearance of such a skilled expert in Yahang. Rather, he realized that with his current abilities, he had an eighty percent chance of defeating Gao Feng. Once he perfected his swordsmanship, defeating Gao Feng would be as easy as flipping his hand! The items bestowed by the system were truly extraordinary! He began to regret not having the courage to hug Huangfu Yuchen before leaving.

In the palace, Huangfu Yuchen inexplicably sneezed several times today.

“Young Master Qin?” Jin Defa called out.

Yan Ge snapped out of his thoughts and gestured with his folding fan towards the woman and a young person who appeared to be eighteen or nineteen years old, “Those two.”

Gao Feng was taken aback.

The man in his mid-twenties also displayed a hint of disappointment on his face.

Jin Defa asked in confusion, “Young Master Qin, didn’t you want to find skilled individuals? How come…”

He wasn’t supposed to ask so many questions to the customer, but curiosity got the better of him.

Yan Ge smiled faintly, turned around, and entered the main hall.

The woman and the young person followed, silently standing behind Yan Ge.

“Those skilled in cooking, step forward,” Yan Ge said.

He selected a cook in her forties.

Then, he chose two boys to handle miscellaneous tasks, both looked agile and about sixteen or seventeen years old. The gatekeeper was an uncle in his forties, and the accountant was a young scholar in his twenties.

Lastly, he picked the maidservants.

In a feudal society that valued men over women, the number of women in Yahang was the highest. Several girls blushed when they first came out and saw Yan Ge’s handsome appearance and his noble demeanor earlier. Now, upon hearing his request for two maidservants, their most beautiful smiles appeared. Among them, a few had remarkable features and their smiles were quite captivating.

However, Yan Ge once again surprised everyone by choosing two ordinary-looking girls.

The two young ladies widened their eyes in astonishment but immediately became happy and hurriedly walked to Yan Ge’s side, fearing he might change his mind.

Yan Ge instructed Jin Defa to dismiss the rest and then asked for the names of the selected individuals. The woman's surname was Deng, addressed as Deng Mama. The other person skilled in martial arts was called Zhao Cheng. The cook's surname was Qian, known as Aunt Qian. The two boys were Zhang Yuan and Liu Rong, both assigned to miscellaneous tasks. The gatekeeper was Uncle Sun, and the accountant was Li Jin. The two maidservants were Chunxiang and Taohua.

Yan Ge looked at Deng Mama and said, "I bought you not only because of your martial arts skills but also your knowledge and experience. There is no need to deny it; I can tell that you are extraordinary person. Therefore, you may need to make frequent public appearances, of course, you won't be doing anything bad. If you can't do this, it's still too late to leave."

Deng Mama curtseyed, "This servant is willing to follow the young master."

Yan Ge nodded, then turned to Zhao Cheng, "Do you know why I didn't buy someone with better skills than you, but instead chose you?"

Zhao Cheng shook his head in confusion, "No, this servant thought Young Master would choose him."

Yan Ge smiled, "His skills are indeed commendable. However, I don't need a thug; I need a guard. His aura is heavier than yours, and you, on the other hand, appear much more composed."

Zhao Cheng sensed his intention and quickly said, "I will faithfully obey any command from Young Master and never dare to act recklessly!"

Yan Ge was satisfied and turned to the somewhat bewildered Jin Defa, "Boss, settle the bill."

Having witnessed Yan Ge's methods, Jin Defa felt the desire to establish a connection and rang the abacus while saying, "The two skilled individuals are the most expensive, thirty taels each; the two young servants, ten taels each; the two maidservants, eight taels each; the gatekeeper, five taels; the cook, five taels; and the accountant, fifteen taels. In total, it amounts to one

hundred and twenty-one taels. Since Master Qin is patronizing my business for the first time, I'll offer you a discount: pay only one hundred and ten taels."

"Then I thank you, Boss Jin," Yan Ge replied with a smile.

Xiao Chuanzi handed over the money. Jin Defa meticulously inspected and handed over the contracts of the newly acquired servants to Yan Ge.

Yan Ge then said, "Boss Jin, later I will also need to buy a house. But for now, I'd like to borrow Boss Jin's place to settle these people."

Upon hearing about a big business opportunity, Jin Defa willingly agreed, "Please, Master Qin. Let me have someone serve you tea."

After Jin Defa left, Yan Ge had to give the newly acquired servants new names. When he asked if they wanted to keep their original names and received affirmative answers, he decided not to rename them. Everyone was grateful for his consideration.

"Xiao Chuan, Zhao Cheng, today you will go and inquire about the number of small restaurants and eateries in the city. Xiao Chuan is young, so you should take care of him. Wan Xiang and Deng Mama will take the rest of the people to the Inn and arrange rooms for everyone. We might not find a suitable courtyard today, but we need a place to rest."

Xiao Chuan and Wan Xiang finally understood that the main reason why the young master bought Deng Mama and Zhao Cheng was to take care of the two of them. They hid their emotions in their hearts and could only repay him with loyalty.

"As for lunch, Xiao Chuan and Wan Xiang will take care of the arrangements. I believe I don't need to personally instruct you on these small matters."

"You can rest assured," Xiao Chuan said, "Wan Xiang and I will handle it."

Yan Ge nodded. “After completing the tasks I have assigned, you can wait for me at Liuxian Pavilion.”

“Yes.”

Afterward, Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuan led the group of people away from Yahang Market.

Yan Ge was not worried about these newly purchased individuals running away. First, their contracts were in his hands, and second, he believed that after witnessing Gao Feng’s skills, they wouldn’t dare to flee. He would select his trusted and capable subordinates from among these people. Hopefully, they wouldn’t disappoint him.

Gao Feng instructed one of the clerks outside the door to call Jin Defa. He explained that they wanted to purchase a courtyard for office use and to provide accommodation for the servants.

Following Yan Ge’s requirements, Jin Defa introduced four courtyards to him. Yan Ge personally visited two of them, and they were quite satisfactory, so he decided to look at the other two later in the afternoon.

At noon, he returned to the Yan Mansion and discussed with Yan Xiaojing and Yan Su about transferring the management of Liuxian Pavilion to someone else.

Yan Xiaojing and Yan Su were struggling to handle the affairs of Liuxian Pavilion, so they were pleased to hand it over to someone else. The only regret was that in the future, Yan Ge would only receive 20% of the income. However, when they thought about the fact that the other major shareholder was the Emperor himself, they dared not dwell on it.

Why did Shen Wansan die? It was said that it was because his immense wealth caused the Emperor’s jealousy.

***Shen Wansan was a historical figure who lived during the late Yuan and early Ming dynasties in China. He was a successful and influential merchant and entrepreneur during that time. Shen Wansan's rise to wealth and power is often depicted in Chinese folklore and literature, making him a popular figure in historical fiction. He is known for his business acumen and his involvement in trade, particularly in silk and salt.**

Yan Ge was afraid that the Yan family would be too concerned, so he carefully analyzed the situation to them, "We are like a pillar supporting Liuxian Pavilion. When Liuxian Pavilion transforms from a small building to a large one, we won't be able to sustain it. By handing over Liuxian Pavilion, we can sit back and relax at home, receiving annual dividends without bearing any risks. Moreover, in the future, it will expand even more, so 20% of the income is already quite substantial."

"Ge'er is right." Yan Xiaojing was the first to express agreement. "In the future, we should refrain from interfering in the affairs of Liuxian Pavilion."

Yan Su and Madam Yan also agreed.

MCUS Chapter 32

In the afternoon, Yan Ge asked Jin Defa to accompany him to visit the other two courtyards and immediately took a liking to the first one.

It was located on Donghe Street, one of the bustling streets, with convenient transportation. The property consisted of three sections, with the inner two sections for the staff to live in and the outer section suitable for office use. The previous owner was a retired court official who had an affinity for elegance and refinement. Every detail of the property was meticulously arranged, creating a captivating scene.

“Boss Jin, how much is this property?” Yan Ge inquired.

“It was originally priced at 2,100 taels. Master Qin is a straightforward person, and I always enjoy dealing with straightforward individuals. If you want it, I can let it go for 2,000 taels,” Jin Defa responded cheerfully.

Yan Ge shook his head and strolled through the small garden. “Of course, I am a straightforward person, but Boss Jin, you don’t seem so straightforward. I must admit, I have taken a liking to this property. However, despite its elegance, it is an old residence that requires renovation and reconstruction. The bridges and pavilions in the garden are dilapidated, and the courtyard walls are worn, with a history of at least ten years. I’m genuinely concerned that a light push could cause them to collapse. Furthermore, the roof tiles are outdated and need to be replaced. It’s a significant project. I can offer 1,800 taels. If Boss Jin is unwilling to compromise, I can explore other options.”

Jin Defa listened attentively, absentmindedly patting his protruding belly. He had not anticipated such negotiations to occur with Yan Ge, and he felt a

bit amazed. This young master may be young, but he was far from easy to deceive, as Jin Defa had initially assumed.

“The price you’re proposing is somewhat low. Master Qin, this property is excellent. It’s located right by the main street, making it convenient to go in any direction, be it east, south, west, or north,” Jin Defa tried to persuade.

Yan Ge snapped his folding fan shut, gesturing to Gao Feng. “Let’s go. We won’t delay Boss Jin’s reception of the next guest.”

“Hey!” Jin Defa realized that Yan Ge was truly leaving and quickly called out, shaking his head. “Fine, let’s consider it a friendship. You can have it for 1,800 taels.”

Yan Ge patted his shoulder and praised with a smile, “Boss Jin is indeed a straightforward person.”

Yan Ge was a head shorter than Jin Defa, amd the latter could only smile wryly.

On that day, Deng Ma and the others moved into the new residence.

Since it was intended to serve as the company’s headquarters, the current entrance seemed rather stingy. Yan Ge instructed Zhao Cheng and Xiao Chuanzi to find craftsmen to dismantle the door and partially demolish the walls. He also contacted a carpenter to custom-make a six-meter-wide and two-meter-tall door that could be opened by sliding from left to right.

Using the walls on both sides as fulcrums, an iron bracket was made above to hang a plaque. On both sides of the gate were two guard booths built in imitation of modern times, and there was a duty room inside the gate. There was a small window between the guard booth on the right and the duty room for communication. The ground on both sides of the courtyard was quite flat and used as a parking lot.

On the morning of the third day, the customized plaque Yan Ge had ordered was delivered.

“Young Master, shall I go buy a set of firecrackers?” among the two young servants, Zhang Yuan, who was more lively, suggested.

The others knew that Yan Ge intended to establish a business place but were not aware of the specifics. Since it was for business purposes, it was customary to celebrate the grand opening by setting off firecrackers for good luck.

“No need,” Strictly smiled mysteriously. “What this young master wants is a quiet and serene atmosphere. However, when you go out on company business, it’s necessary to mention the company’s name. Hang up the plaque.”

With a large entrance, the plaque naturally needed to be sizable as well. Gao Yun and Zhao Cheng each lifted one end and climbed separate ladders to hang it up. Once it was in place, Yan Ge ascended as well and personally unveiled the red cloth covering the plaque. Passersby had never seen such a large door and plaque before, and they gathered in groups to witness the spectacle.

On the black plaque, golden characters spelled out “First Company,” with iron drawings and silver hooks, depicting dragons and phoenixes in a magnificent display. These simple words emitted an aura of dominance and confidence. In the lower right corner of the plaque, a golden circle enclosed a golden “1,” which served as the logo designed by Yan Ge for the company.

“The First Company…” Xiao Chuan’s face brimmed with curiosity. “Master, what does ‘company’ mean?”

“It’s a place where business matters are handled,” explained Yan Ge. Just as he was about to say more, a boy of about ten years old, with a lively and clever appearance, ran over from the end of the street.

“Is Master Qin living here?” the boy asked.

“I am,” Yan Ge replied, perplexed, as he looked at the boy.

The boy continued, “A person named Gao Feng sent me to deliver a message and said you would give me money too.”

Yan Ge’s eyes curved, and he took out several coins from his sleeve, stuffing them into the boy’s hand. “Thank you. What message did he want you to deliver?”

“He told me to tell you that it’s a success,” the boy said gleefully, tucking the money into his clothes, and then ran off without another word.

Zhao Cheng and the others were completely puzzled.

Yan Ge maintained a composed expression, but he couldn’t help but fell excited. The fountain pen had been successfully made! That Master Li was truly talented. He had initially given him three days, and because these past two days had been too busy, he hadn’t gone to see him yesterday. Unexpectedly, he received such good news so quickly.

“Xiao Shuanzi, prepare the carriage.”

He couldn’t let Master Li know that someone was watching him so on arriving at the blacksmith shop, Yan Ge calmly walked in, as did Gao Yun and Gao Feng, who acted as if nothing had happened.

“Is Master Li here?”

Master Li quickly emerged, his face wearing a bright smile, his wrinkled lines becoming even more pronounced.

“Master Li seems to be in a good mood. Could it be that the matter is resolved?”

“Master Qin, you came at the right time. Please follow me.”

Entering a small room next to them, Yan Ge spotted a wooden object that resembled a pen on the table—it was the fountain pen made by Master Li. It had a pen body and a pen cap, and its appearance seemed quite good.

Master Li smiled and said, “I never imagined that such a magical thing could exist in this world. I tried drawing on paper with it, and it indeed writes very delicately.” It was then that Gao Feng, who was watching secretly, sent someone to inform Yan Ge.

The paper was still there, with some very fine lines on it.

Yan Ge picked up the fountain pen, feeling its lightness in his hand. He removed the cap, examined the nib, and then wrote a few words on the paper, a smile playing at the corner of his lips. Afterwards, he twisted the pen body to expose the ink cartridge. Though the appearance was rough, it didn’t leak ink. He gently squeezed it, and a drop of ink seeped out from the nib.

“Not bad, quite impressive.”

Gao Feng took out ten taels of silver ingot and handed them to Master Li.

After Yan Ge took a seat, he inquired, “Master Li, is this nib made of iron?”

Master Li nodded regretfully, “Yes, it’s iron. I’ve been pondering using alternative materials to replace iron recently. I have some ideas, but I won’t know if they will work until I try. Master Qin, could you give me a few more days…”

Yan Ge expressed understanding, “Of course. You have done a remarkable job so far, not only with the nib of the fountain pen but also with further improvements to its appearance. I will send someone later, and if you need anything, let him go to the First Company on Donghe Street to find me. How does that sound?”

“Alright,” Master Li agreed without hesitation.

Yan Ge said, “I’ll take this pen with me to show my boss.”

Master Li nodded, “No problem.”

As they walked out of the blacksmith shop, Yan Ge’s lips curled into a smile, and his eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. “Gao Yun, let’s return to the

garden!”

It was inappropriate to say “return to the palace” outside the palace, so he said “return to the garden.” If he said “go back,” it meant returning to the residence on Donghe Street, and “return to the mansion” referred to the Yan Mansion.

Gao Feng stayed behind to continue monitoring Master Li.

Two spirited horses hastened toward the palace. The palace guards at the gate were already familiar with them. They glanced at their tokens and allowed them inside.

Yan Ge turned to Gao Yun and said, “You go and inquire if the Emperor is at Tenglong Palace.”

**Oh, btw, Tenglong means “soaring dragons”.

“Yes,” Gao Yun replied.

Yan Ge continued walking at a leisurely pace, engaging in an animated discussion with Yan Jin about the rewards they were about to receive. He passed palace maids and eunuchs who saw him dressed casually and didn’t recognize his identity, so they only kneeled and saluted before quietly walking away.

“Xiao Jin, what do you think the system will reward me with once I am promoted to Changzai?” Yan Jin asked, filled with anticipation.

Yan Jin also looked forward to it and replied cheerfully, “It will definitely be something good.”

“Oh?” Yan Ge detected something in Yan Jin’s words. “Do you know what it is?”

“Yes, Master, but I cannot reveal it yet,” Yan Jin advised. “Master, you will find out soon enough. There’s no need to rush.”

“Fair enough.”

Gao Yun quickly returned, “Reporting to Yan Daying, the Emperor is currently in the Imperial Garden.” Inside the palace, everything had to follow ceremonial procedures, so he reverted to using the title “Yan Daying.”

“Lead the way.”

The sun was shining, and despite the gentle breeze, the air remained stifling. Huang Fu Yuchen sat expressionless in the pavilion, sipping tea, while on the other side, a consort played the qin.

“Yan Ge pays respects to the Emperor.” Yan Ge bowed to Huangfu Yuchen from outside the pavilion.

The consort turned her head, and Yan Ge realized she was the Empress, so he bowed once again.

“Paying respects to the Empress.”

“Rise.” The Empress was taken aback. Since when did the Emperor grant a male consort the not to kneel? Furthermore, this male consort not only dressed in casual attire but also didn’t refer to himself as a “servant or concubine.” She secretly glanced at Huang Fu Yuchen, and her lowered eyelashes concealed her deep thoughts.

Huangfu Yuchen inquired curiously, “Why has Yan Daying come at this time?”

Yan Ge couldn’t help but smile. “Your Majesty, Yan Daying has good news to report.”

Huangfu Yuchen immediately guessed that there had been significant progress regarding the pen. He nodded, stood up, and said to the Empress, “Empress, I have pressing matters to attend to and cannot accompany you.”

“Yes,” the Empress kneeled gracefully. “I respectfully bid farewell to Your Majesty.”

Deng Mande sang, “Your Majesty, please proceed—”

Yan Ge and Gao Yun followed beside the imperial carriage.

Eager to know about the pen, Huangfu Yuchen had only moved a short distance before ordering his entourage to stop the carriage. He instructed Yan Ge, “Yan Daying, come up here.”

Yan Ge was curious about Huang Fu Yuchen’s dragon carriage. After expressing gratitude, he climbed aboard.

As soon as he entered the carriage, he felt a refreshing coolness. It turned out that two ice basins had been placed at the corners of the carriage, perfectly alleviating the heat from Yan Ge’s hurried journey. The gauzy curtains were lowered, reducing the dissipation of the cool air.

The dragon carriage was spacious, and a soft carpet was laid in front of the golden seat that could accommodate three people side by side.

Yan Ge’s eyes roamed around and noticed that besides the golden chair Huangfu Yuchen was sitting on, there wasn’t even a cushion available. He had no choice but to stand. Standing wasn’t an issue, but he was nearly a head taller than the carriage bearers, which felt quite awkward.

Huangfu Yuchen didn’t overlook his slight movement. He glanced at him and made room by moving to the side. “Come and sit.”

Yan Ge was surprised, but since Huangfu Yuchen dared to invite him, he dared to accept. He walked over and took a seat, saying, “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

The golden chair was designed for one person, so it was a bit cramped with two people. The two of them sat close together, and Yan Ge’s heart began to beat faster.

Huangfu Yuchen was exactly the type he liked, and the mature masculine aura enveloped him entirely. He secretly exhaled a long breath from his chest, slightly easing his heartbeat.

“Is it about that matter?” Huangfu Yuchen asked.

“Yes,” Yan Ge replied.

There were people around so Huang Fu Yuchen didn’t ask further. Instead, he turned his head to observe Yan Ge.

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Yan Ge let Huangfu Yuchen look at him, and he couldn't help but think that if that side mission appeared at this moment, he would definitely have the courage to hug Huangfu Yuchen. In case Huangfu Yuchen blamed him, he could openly state that it was Huangfu Yuchen's gaze that had led him to misunderstand and believe that there was some interest from him.

As he imagined the possible awkward expression Huangfu Yuchen would have if he were suddenly hugged, the corners of his lips curled up noticeably.

Huangfu Yuchen thought that he was smiling because of his attention and immediately averted his gaze, his complexion becoming faint.

At that moment—

–"Ding. Side mission – Give the Emperor a hug. Mission time: 2 minutes. On successful completion of the mission, you will be rewarded 100 taels of silver and a silver box. On failing the mission, 100 taels of silver will be deducted. Accept the mission by selecting 'yes' or reject the mission by selecting 'no'."

Yan Ge was startled. Was there even a need to consider? Quickly select "yes." As soon as the system prompted the mission to begin, he unhesitatingly stretched out his arms and wrapped them around Huangfu Yuchen's waist.

Huangfu Yuchen abruptly turned his head, a look of shock on his face, and his body instantly stiffened. They were too close, so close they were able to see their reflections in each other's eyes and feel each other's breath.

Yan Ge quickly released him.

“Ding. Side mission – Give the Emperor a hug— successful. You have been rewarded 100 taels of silver and a silver box. Would you like to open the silver box now?”

Now was not the time to check the silver box, so Yan Ge selected “no.” The silver box automatically returned to the backpack.

“Stop the sedan,” Huangfu Yuchen said with a solemn face. “Get off!”

“Your Majesty, you’ve been staring at this servant. The servant thought…” Yan Ge intentionally referred to himself as the “servant” and quietly explained before swiftly getting off the sedan, squatting on the ground, and burying his head in his arms.

Huangfu Yuchen’s handsome face darkened, and he coldly snorted.

The eunuchs who carried the sedan trembled, not daring to move a muscle, fearing to further provoke Huangfu Yuchen. The surroundings became eerily silent.

Deng Mande approached the imperial carriage, guessed what happened inside, and felt even deeper sympathy for Yan Daying, who loved the Emperor.

Gao Yun respected Yan Ge’s talent, and although he was sympathetic, he was powerless to help.

Huangfu Yuchen saw Yan Ge squatting there through the gauze curtain, his shoulders trembling, and his aggrieved figure made him feel a bit unbearable. He had to admit that he couldn’t blame Yan Daying for what happened just now. Yan Daying was his consort, and he had been staring at Yan Daying for so long that it was not surprising for the other party to misunderstand. Moreover, Yan Daying had just performed a meritorious deed, and treating him like this seemed inappropriate.

Little did he know that Yan Ge was not actually feeling dejected but rather trying hard to suppress his laughter. Huangfu Yuchen’s reaction was exactly as he had imagined, how could he not find it amusing? He had to bite his lip

hard to restrain his desire to burst into laughter, and his face was probably turning red from the effort.

After a while, Huangfu Yuchen cleared his throat and said in a softened tone, “Okay. Come up.”

Yan Ge finally managed to restrain his desire to laugh, stood up, and said to Huangfu Yuchen, “Thank you, Your Majesty. But I will walk on my own. It’s good for the body to walk more.”

“When I tell you to come up, you come up,” Huangfu Yuchen replied impatiently.

Yan Ge could only climb onto the imperial carriage again, sitting upright, not looking sideways, with a lingering blush on his face.

Huangfu Yuchen thought that perhaps he should hug him to prevent Yan Daying’s heart from feeling cold, but he couldn’t bring himself to make such an intimate gesture towards another man. Instead, he lifted his large palm and gently rubbed Yan Ge’s head. It was soft and felt good, and to his surprise, he didn’t feel any aversion.

Yan Ge looked at him in surprise, feeling puzzled, but Huangfu Yuchen was clearly extending an olive branch to him, so he quickly smiled at him.

Huangfu Yuchen raised the corners of his mouth and withdrew his hand.

The atmosphere inside the imperial carriage finally regained harmony.

Upon returning to Tenglong Palace, Huangfu Yuchen said, “Grant Yan Daying audience.”

Deng Mande sent away all the palace maids and eunuchs in the hall.

“Yan Daying, please give me the details,” Huangfu Yuchen walked to the throne and sat down, his expression serious.

Yan Ge took out a pen from his sleeve pocket. “Your Majesty, this is the sample I had someone make.”

“Present it.”

Yan Ge said, “Your Majesty, first unscrew the cap—the cap is the lower part.”

Huangfu Yuchen had never seen such a novel object and wasn’t sure which part Yan Ge was referring to, so he simply said, “You come here.”

Yan Ge walked to the edge of the desk and took the pen from Huangfu Yuchen’s hand, uncovering the cap before returning the pen to him.

Deng Mande opened a sheet of paper, and Huangfu Yuchen instinctively held the pen like he would hold a brush.

Yan Ge reached out to correct him. “Like this… rest the pen against the web of your hand and grip it with your thumb and index finger here.”

Deng Mande pretended not to notice Yan Ge touching the Emperor’s hand.

Huangfu Yuchen looked at Yan Ge, not stopping him. After correctly holding the pen, he wrote on the paper: “Prosperous Nation, Strong Country.”

The strokes were indeed delicate, but the handwriting wasn’t particularly pleasing due to his lack of familiarity with holding the pen. Huangfu Yuchen then wrote the same characters with a brush. By comparison, the characters written with the new pen were much smaller. With the cap closed, it could be conveniently carried around. When needed, it could be unscrewed—a truly convenient tool.

“Good, very good!” Huangfu Yuchen praised, examining the pen closely. “Where does the ink come from?”

Yan Ge glanced at the characters written with the brush and praised, “Great handwriting!”

He removed the pen cap and explained it to Huangfu Yuchen in detail. “The main issue now is that the iron pen nib is prone to rust. The key is to find a substitute material for iron.”

Huangfu Yuchen smiled. “There’s no need to worry about that. I will have people search for usable alternatives throughout the entire kingdom. I believe we will find one soon.”

Yan Ge hurriedly added, “Your Majesty, about the previous agreement…” Now that the Emperor had intervened, could he still take credit for the invention of the pen?

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at him. “When I make a promise, I keep it.”

Yan Ge smiled. “Thank you, Your Majesty! However, what about the craftsman?”

Huangfu Yuchen pondered for a moment. “Let him continue searching. Whether he finds it first or my people find it, once the pen is truly completed, I will bestow upon him the title of ‘Loyal and Righteous Craftsman,’ sixth rank, and reward him with 1000 taels of silver. How does that sound?”

Yan Ge hurriedly replied, “Yan Daying will convey Your Majesty’s gratitude to him. Your Majesty’s concern for the people is indeed a blessing to the kingdom. May I ask, when can Yan Daying be promoted?”

MCUS Chapter 34

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at him casually, “Why the rush? Wait until the fountain pen is truly successful.”

Yan Ge nodded earnestly, his tone sincere, “Yes, I’ll wait. I’ll truly wait.”

Huangfu Yuchen felt inexplicably upset. The way he spoke made it seem like he intentionally delayed the proclamation of the promotion. But since his mood was currently good, he didn’t bother arguing with him. He continued writing on the paper with the fountain pen until he found the perfect balance of pressure, making the characters look beautiful.

“By the way, Your Majesty,” Yan Ge said, “when the fountain pen is mass-produced, can we stamp it with this mark?” He took out an exquisite seal from his sleeve pocket, and the company’s logo was engraved on it.

“What’s this?” Huangfu Yuchen took the seal and examined it closely. He wouldn’t receive the report on affairs outside the palace from Gao Feng and Gao Yun until the evening, so he didn’t know that Yan Ge had established a company.

Yan Ge vaguely replied, “It just represents my involvement in the creation of the fountain pen. Your Majesty, it’s just a seal.”

Huangfu Yuchen raised an eyebrow, “It’s not as simple as it seems, right?”

Yan Ge touched his temple. He couldn’t reveal this yet. He was certain that once Huangfu Yuchen knew what it was for, he would try to get one over him again. Once bitten by a snake, one fears even a rope for ten years.

However, Huangfu Yuchen wasn’t foolish. “Does this seal represent you? I can allow you to use it, but how about I gift you one instead?”

Yan Ge replied tactfully, “The circle in this seal represents completeness, and the horizontal line signifies ‘number one’—”

Huangfu Yuchen interrupted decisively, “Let me think of a better one for you.”

Yan Ge couldn’t refuse, “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Huangfu Yuchen pondered for a moment, looked at Yan Ge with a mysterious gaze, and picked up the fountain pen to draw on the white paper. After a moment, he asked Yan Ge, “How about I bestow this seal upon you?”

Yan Ge raised his eyes and saw a circle drawn on the paper with a strange character inside it, a character he didn’t recognize.

“I’m not familiar with this character,” Yan Ge didn’t immediately react.

“You naturally wouldn’t recognize it,” Huangfu Yuchen’s eyes were full of deep meaning as he calmly explained, “This character is my creation today. It’s pronounced ‘fei’.”

*Fei means imperial consort.

A circle enclosing a “ ” character. Could it be that Huangfu Yuchen was warning him that even if he could leave the palace every day, he couldn’t escape the fate of being his consort? Yan Ge hoped he was overthinking.

“What does Yan Ge think of using this character for the seal?” Huangfu Yuchen lifted his teacup.

“It’s wonderful! Thank you for your deep favor, Your Majesty. Your servant is both honored and amazed.” Yan Ge approached with a beaming smile, placing a hand on Huangfu Yuchen’s shoulder, his eyes filled with a smile

as he softly said, “Your Majesty, why not let this servant stay in your palace today to accompany you?”

Although the inscription ‘fei’ made him uncomfortable, the seal itself was merely an external form. The crucial point was the act of imprinting. The power of the brand will bring immense wealth.

Deng Mande promptly lowered his head.

Huangfu Yuchen had just taken a sip of tea and nearly choked. “Ahem! there’s no need. We will have the seal prepared and sent to you. We still have official duties to attend to, and Yan Daying can leave on his own.” He set down his teacup and picked up the memorial, looking at it seriously.

Yan Ge curved his lips slightly, bowed, and then turned away, his footsteps unusually light and brisk.

Huangfu Yuchen put down the memorial, leaned back in his chair, and gazed in the direction Yan Ge had left. “Deng Mande, do you think Yan Daying was serious just now?”

Deng Mande hesitated and replied, “This servant doesn’t dare to speculate, Your Majesty.”

“Speak,” Huangfu Yuchen said, “We will pardon you.”

Deng Mande finally spoke, “In this servant’s view, Yan Daying has deep affection for Your Majesty. Otherwise, he wouldn’t need to concern himself with matters of status. With his ability to accumulate wealth, Your Majesty could provide him with security in the palace without a second thought.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s expression became momentarily dazed, and he was lost in thought. Then he furrowed his brow and said, “It seems that I should still try to keep some distance from him.”

Deng Mande remained silent.

After Yan Ge left, he returned to Luoxue Palace and eagerly opened the silver chest.

–“Ding. Congratulations, you have obtained an amethyst crystal.”

In front of Yan Ge appeared a purple stone larger than a washbasin, its surface radiating colorful and dazzling lights. It felt smooth and cool to the touch. The stone didn’t appear large, so he tried to move it, only to find that it was unexpectedly heavy and immovable.

“Little Jin, what is the purpose of the purple secret crystal?” he asked.

–The system immediately replied: “The amethyst crystal is a material that can be refined into treasures. However, master currently has no need for it.’”

Yan Ge, having played online games before, understood his explanation. Perhaps his expectations were too high after acquiring the Flowing Sand Sword Technique, so he felt somewhat disappointed this time. However, the system would definitely not give him something useless. He placed the crystal back into the backpack, setting this matter aside for now, and then turned and left the palace.

Upon returning to the company, he had someone replace the signboard. The name “First Company” remained the same, but the numeral “one” in the lower right corner of the logo circle was changed to “fei.” Just the thought that all future products associated with him would bear his company’s mark filled him with joy. As for the meaning represented by “fei,” he deliberately cast it aside, both consciously and unconsciously.

Yan Ge sat behind his desk, asking Xiao Chuanzi and Zhao Cheng, “How is the investigation that I assigned you progressing?”

Zhao Cheng had gradually understood over the past few days that the Young Master was training Xiao Chuanzi. His main responsibility was to protect Xiao Chuanzi from being bullied. Thus, he remained silent.

Xiao Chuanzi replied, “Master, it’s already been investigated.”

“Very good,” Yan Ge nodded in satisfaction. “Next, you two need to open a small shop and sell spicy hot pot and barbecue.”

“Spicy hot pot? Barbecue?” Xiao Chuanzi looked perplexed.

Yan Ge first explained to him what spicy hot pot and barbecue were. “I will give you the recipe for the seasonings later. Remember, the shop shouldn’t be too small but also doesn’t need to be too big. It should be able to accommodate around ten tables. As for the name, think of it yourselves, but make sure to include the company’s logo on the signboard. For vegetarian dishes, charge one coin for two skewers; for meat dishes, the price will be determined by the ingredients and portion, with a minimum of two coins per skewer. It’s fine to incur some losses in the first three to five days.”

Xiao Chuanzi was even more confused. “And incur losses too? Master, I’m completely baffled. Even if there are no losses, how much money can we earn by selling dishes at such low prices?” He truly couldn’t understand. Liuxian Pavilion’s reputation had already been restored, and it was developing better and better, earning tens of thousands of taels. Opening this small shop might earn a dozen or twenty taels at most. The Young Master was someone who aimed to make big money, so why bother with this?

Yan Ge didn’t explain further and only said, “You will understand why we’re doing this in the future. You can also think about the reasons behind it. If you truly figure it out, I will reward you. Zhao Cheng, the same goes for you.”

Zhao Cheng was pleased. “Thank you, Young Master, for giving me the opportunity. I will definitely ponder it carefully.”

Yan Ge turned to Liu Rong and said, “Go and bring Wan Xiang and Deng Mama here.”

“Yes.”

Currently, the company had not yet entered the right track, and Wan Xiang and Deng Mama were handling some miscellaneous matters in the residence.

“Young Master.”

“Greetings, Young Master.” Deng Mama performed a standard bow.

Yan Ge said, “I want the two of you to investigate how many clothing workshops there are in the city, which ones are thriving, and which ones are on the verge of closing. Pay attention to the quality and sales of clothes in each workshop. It would be best if you could make a detailed record.”

Wan Xiang was still a bit confused, but Deng Mama understood.

Yan Ge didn’t say much more. If Deng Mama was clever enough, she would give Wan Xiang some hints.

In the afternoon, Gao Feng, who was in charge of monitoring Old Li, returned.

“Young Master, the boss was worried that you didn’t have enough manpower, so he sent someone to replace this subordinate,” Gao Feng explained. It wasn’t appropriate to address him as “Emperor” outside the palace, so he simply followed Yan Ge’s example and referred to him as the “boss.”

Yan Ge immediately developed a slightly better impression of Huangfu Yuchen. It was true that he didn’t have enough manpower by his side, and Gao Feng’s return came at just the right time.

“This is what that person brought along,” Gao Feng said.

It was a small silk-wrapped bundle, and from its shape, it seemed to contain a box.

Yan Ge took it and opened it. As expected, there was a delicate brocade box inside, and when he lifted the lid, a beautiful jade of emerald green color lay within.

–“Master, this jade is valuable! It’s worth at least two thousand taels!” Yan Jin admired it for a while before speaking.

Yan Ge guessed what it was and turned the jade over. He saw that there were already inscriptions at the bottom, with the characters “ ” and “ ”

tightly enclosed within a circle. These two characters were written in seal script, and the carving turned out surprisingly well, harmonious and aesthetically pleasing.

Since he couldn’t refuse, he could only accept it. He put away the jade seal and said to Gao Feng, “You returned at just the right time. Later, you and Gao Yun will accompany me to a better calligraphy and painting shop. We need to promptly address the matter of the maps.”

“Yes.”

That evening, when Yan Ge returned to the palace, he brought a gift for Huangfu Yuchen. It was a set of lifelike clay sculptures of the twelve zodiac animals. They were not valuable in terms of monetary worth, but their novelty made them precious.

Huangfu Yuchen placed them on the display shelf in his study, so he probably didn’t dislike them.

MCUS Chapter 35

The old map of the capital city was used a reference for the new map.

Yan Ge sought the expertise of a skilled artist and within a day, both a simplified and exquisite version of the new map were drawn and sent to the printing house for mass production. Both versions recorded the streets, residences, shops, government offices, and meticulously labeled their names after entering the city through its four gates. However, the exquisite version was drawn with greater intricacy, and different colors were used to distinguish between residences, shops, and government offices, while the imperial city was depicted in a dignified golden hue.

Huangfu Yuchen greatly appreciated the maps after reviewing them. Naturally, he received the first copy free of charge, and unsurprisingly, behind the words “Capital City Map”, he discovered the slightly smaller font saying “The First Company” and a familiar seal, “ ”.

Yan Ge first placed both versions of the map for sale in Liuxian Pavilion. The ordinary map was priced at four coins per copy, while the exquisite map was priced at five taels per copy. People had never seen such exquisite and detailed maps before, and without hesitation, they reached into their pockets, fearing that they might miss out if they were a step too slow.

They not only bought them, but also bought several copies. Merchants sent them to friends, low-ranking officials sent them to superiors, and the wealthy sent them to their families… As for the ordinary map, Yan Ge had already anticipated that the affluent patrons dining at Liuxian Pavilion would not be interested. The reason for placing them there was merely for publicity.

On the first day, only over 30 copies of the ordinary map were sold, mostly purchased by the staff at Liuxian Pavilion. However, all 1,000 copies of the exquisite map were sold out in an instant!

Huangfu Yuchen was somewhat puzzled when he suddenly received over a dozen copies of the exquisite map from ministers and consorts. It wasn't until he heard the report in the evening that he understood what was going on and had to admit Yan Ge's idea was ingenious. That face that always seemed to be smiling kept appearing in his mind.

The next day, when more people wanting to do business went to Liuxian Pavilion after hearing the news, they found that the maps were no longer being sold there. After inquiring, they learned that the map manufacturer had entrusted the selling of maps to others, and they could be purchased at various major restaurants, clothing stores, inns, silver shops, and carriage shops.

As for a higher commission? Well, forget it. Our company was willing to entrust you with selling the maps because it's also a way for us to attract business. You are the ones benefiting from this.

The shop owners had nothing to say. This was indeed the truth. Liuxian Pavilion had stopped selling maps, and during the first few days when the maps were in high demand, people looking to buy maps naturally went to their shops. Wasn't it just a convenient opportunity for them to eat or rest in their establishments when they were hungry or tired?

Meanwhile, the prices of the maps also changed. Buying a map anywhere in the city cost four coins for the ordinary version and two taels of silver for the exquisite version. However, if purchased from a small stall at the city gates, the ordinary map was priced at eight coins, and the exquisite version at four taels of silver. It was twice as expensive as buying it within the city.

Huangfu Yuchen asked Yan Ge why.

Yan Ge explained skillfully, "Your Majesty, as the ruler of this imperial city, it is not unreasonable to offer the people some benefits. I am merely safeguarding the interests of the people of the Imperial city. As for

outsiders, I am currently unable to accommodate them; their silver won't come without a cost."

These words were pleasing, and Huang Fu Yuchen couldn't help but smile.

Yan Ge also smiled. Yes, the thighs still had to be held tightly for now.

Perceptive businessmen from other regions saw the commercial opportunities of the map and, upon returning home, decided to purchase hundreds of exquisite maps and thousands of ordinary ones to sell in their own territories. Those who were planning to visit the imperial city in the future would be in dire need of a map.

In just five days, the first batch of fifty thousand ordinary maps and twenty thousand exquisite maps sold out completely. The printing workshop began a new round of printing, with the second batch primarily intended for sales in other regions. Almost every noble in the imperial city already had a copy of the exquisite map.

Boxes filled with silver were placed before Yan Ge, and he smiled with satisfaction. After admiring them for a while, he instructed Gao Feng to transport half of the silver to the money exchange, where it would be exchanged for silver tickets. He planned to hand them over to Huang Fu Yuchen later that evening upon returning to the palace.

Huang Fu Yuchen noticed Yan Ge's reluctant gaze on the silver tickets and found it amusing. Nevertheless, Yan Ge was indeed talented, and he didn't mind treating him well. "Have you already had your evening meal?" he asked.

Yan Ge replied, "I hurried back to report good news to Your Majesty and haven't eaten yet."

Huang Fu Yuchen said, "Join me for dinner."

Deng Mande conveniently forgot who made the previous declaration to avoid Yan Ge as much as possible.

He walked to the door and instructed the palace attendants to serve the meal. Soon, palace maidens entered one after another, filling the imperial dining table with delicious delicacies.

“Please take a seat.”

Once the eunuch responsible for tasting the dishes and Huang Fu Yuchen had sampled the food and started eating, Yan Ge picked up his chopsticks and began to eat. He was truly hungry, which made his movements a bit quick.

Huang Fu Yuchen didn’t reproach him. Yan Ge’s various unconventional behaviors had already made him helpless and he had become more casual with Yan Ge.

Huangfu Yuchen observed him enjoying the food and casually asked, “How does the taste of these dishes compare to those of Liuxian Pavilion?”

Yan Ge answered truthfully, “Although some of the dishes use the same recipes as Liuxian Pavilion, they are evidently superior in terms of appearance, aroma, and taste. The royal chefs truly excel at their craft.”

“It seems that the imperial chefs are really doing a good job if they can get Yan Daying’s praise,” Huangfu Yuchen said to Deng Mande, “Pass on my word, the royal chefs shall receive double their monthly allowance this month.”

Yan Ge glanced at him. He had also done well, so why wasn’t Huang Fu Yuchen rewarding him? After all, it was the silver he had earned.

Huang Fu Yuchen saw through his thoughts and took a sip of wine. “Haven’t I already rewarded you with a royal meal?”

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‘Rewarded him with a meal?’ Yan Ge snorted inwardly as he skillfully picked up the last lion head in the braised lion head dish with his chopsticks.

Huangfu Yuchen looked at his pitiful expression and murmured, “If you haven’t had dinner after returning to the palace, you can always come and have dinner with me.”

Yan Ge agreed immediately. How could he not be happy to frequently eat the dishes made by the imperial kitchen?

Suddenly, Emperor Huangfu Yuchen said leisurely, “Wait for me outside the palace gate tomorrow morning. We’ll go out together.”

Yan Ge, who had just taken a bite of the lion’s head, looked at him unexpectedly. He swallowed the food in his mouth and asked uncertainly, “Your Majesty, are you going out of the palace?”

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “I’m curious about your company and want to visit. That shouldn’t be a problem, right?”

“Of course not,” Yan Ge understood his curiosity about new things, there was nothing to hide anyway. “However, there’s a snack shop opening tomorrow, and I want to go and have a look. I’m afraid you won’t like noisy places. Perhaps, you can go directly to the company with Gao Feng and Gao Yun?”

Huangfu Yuchen thought for a moment and said, “I’d rather go with you. It’s good to walk around.”

Yan Ge then said, “Since Your Majesty is going out disguised, it’s best to bring along a few more guards.” From the history textbooks and TV dramas, he had always thought that “emperors” were dangerous and terrifying people. If anything displeased them, they would either punish or kill their subjects. But after interacting with Huangfu Yuchen for a long time, he didn’t find him terrifying. On the contrary, he felt that it was nice to be able to get along with him.

Or maybe he hadn’t touched Huangfu Yuchen’s bottom line, which was why Huangfu Yuchen didn’t show his terrifying side in front of him. But that was enough. As long as he remembered not to cross Huangfu Yuchen’s bottom line, he could continue to hug his thigh in peace.

“Deng Mande will arrange it,” Emperor Huangfu Yuchen said.

“Your Majesty, Yan Daying, please rest assured.” Deng Mande thought to himself, ‘the slave thought that Your Majesty didn’t know that the slave was also present. The atmosphere between Your Majesty and Yan Daying is too harmonious, as if no one else exists.’

The eunuchs and palace maids on the side also felt that the atmosphere was different from before. But living in the Tenglong Palace, they knew what they could and couldn’t say outside. Otherwise, it would be best to prepare for death.

The next day, Yan Daying waited outside the palace gate for a long time before Huangfu Yuchen finally arrived in disguise. He wore a jade hairpin to tie up his hair, dressed in a white silk gown with blue embroidered gold patterns along the edges, and draped a dark gold robe over it, exuding an air of nobility with every move. Deng Mande followed behind him, along with four guards dressed similarly.

“Your Majesty, are you only bringing these few people?” Yan Ge frowned disapprovingly.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Don’t worry.”

Yan Ge secretly probed and sensed a few hidden auras in the shadows. They were well concealed, and it was difficult to detect without careful perception. It turned out there were hidden guards.

Huangfu Yuchen didn't prepare a separate carriage and got on the carriage with Yan Ge, while the others mounted their horses and they all moved towards the inner city.

Every day in the capital was lively. The streets were bustling with traffic, people coming and going, and the hustle and bustle filled the air. The sound of horse hooves, the clattering of carriage wheels, and the tireless shouting of the vendors. There were people selling food, sugar-coated haws, roasted sweet potatoes, malt candy; selling clothes, fabric, and shoes; selling toys, clay figurines, masks…etc

When they arrived at the snack shop, the opening ceremony had already ended. The fragrant aroma of spicy hot pot and barbecue wafted out, enticing everyone. Customers lined up outside the shop, creating a lively scene.

Inside the shop, every table was occupied, and several waiters carried trays back and forth between the tables, busy to the point where their feet barely touched the ground. They occasionally shouted to the kitchen, asking which table's dishes were ready.

"Boss, I want to go inside. What about you?" Yan Ge said.

Huangfu Yuchen took the folding fan from his hand. "It's fine. But just call me… Brother. Is there a private room?" He was interested in the fragrant food emanating from inside. "It's just in time for an early lunch."

Yan Ge looked at him in surprise. "Actually, it's very… common food."

"It doesn't matter," Huangfu Yuchen waved his hand.

Yan Ge was speechless. "What I mean is, this is a shop that caters to common people, so there are no private rooms. However, there's a small hall in the backyard."

“Let’s go in,” Huangfu Yuchen stepped forward.

Yan Ge quickly followed, walking beside him. This was an important figure. If anything went wrong in his shop, how would he be able to hug his thigh?

Huangfu Yuchen smiled silently when he noticed how Yan Ge closely followed him and scanned the surrounding guests with guarded eyes.

Xiao Chuanzi and Wan Xiang had already entered the city ahead of them. They were busy with their hands full and when they saw them coming in, they hurriedly approached.

Yan Ge shook his head and gestured towards the inner courtyard.

Xiao Chuanzi quickly led two attendants and rushed in to tidy up. He had never had the fortune to meet the emperor, but Yan Ge had told him that he would go out of the palace with the emperor. Who else could that impressive man be if not the emperor?

This group of people exuded an imposing presence and the customers in the shop curiously looked over, but when they met the cold eyes of the four guards’ eyes, they quickly averted their gaze.

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In the small hall, Huangfu Yuchen instructed, “Bring some of every dish here.”

Yan Ge noticed he didn’t know how things were done and after personally pouring tea for Huangfu Yuchen, he said to Xiao Chuanzi, “Bring the menu for Brother to see.”

The term “brother” came naturally, and Huangfu Yuchen felt a different sensation compared to when Huangfu Yuhu called him brother. He pondered over it briefly but couldn’t pinpoint the reason, his gaze thoughtful.

Xiao Chuanzi swiftly went to fetch the menu, deeply admiring his master.

After the menu arrived, Yan Ge said to Huangfu Yuchen, “Spicy hot pot involves cooking various ingredients in a pre-prepared soup base, resulting in a delightful aroma. As for barbecue, it involves grilling the food over charcoal and seasoning it, creating a unique flavor. Brother, feel free to try anything you like. Eunuch Deng, you understand Brother’s taste the best, so I’m afraid I have to ask you to keep an eye on things.” While it seemed like he was concerned about Huangfu Yuchen’s preferences, in reality, he was instructing Deng Mande to be vigilant against any poisonings. Among everyone present, Deng Mande was the person Huangfu Yuchen trusted the most. Of course, there wouldn’t be anyone attempting to poison him, but mentioning it was a proactive measure.

Deng Mande replied, “Understood.”

Yan Ge worried that Huangfu Yuchen might misunderstand him for not presenting the secret recipe, so he added, “The vegetarian dishes here cost

one coin per skewer, while the non-vegetarian dishes start from two coins per skewer. Even the common people can afford them."

Huangfu Yuchen understood his concern and felt a sense of helplessness. Did Yan Ge see him as the kind of person who would use any means necessary to satisfy his appetite and demand others to offer their secret recipes? However, an emperor is proud, and even if misunderstood, he didn't bother explaining. Thus, he simply nodded and said, "Very well. But I can't understand, how much silver can a small shop like this can earn in a month?"

Yan Ge emphasized, "It's just for earning some pocket money, a small amount."

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at him suspiciously, then he lowered his head to look at the menu, and ordered a few items of hot pot and barbecue.

The two dishes appeared unremarkable, but once tasted, they were really delicious. Huangfu Yuchen said to Deng Mande and the few guards, "Try them all, eat to your heart's content. This meal is on my little brother."

Huangfu Yuchen had a thick skin, and Yan Ge could match it, or even surpass it. "Brother, I thought today I would be dining with the affluent, so I didn't bring any money."

Huangfu Yuchen: "…"

Deng Mande seized the opportunity to align himself with Yan Ge, "This slave brought some. Let this slave have a chance to treat the two masters."

Yan Ge quickly interjected, "Haha, no need. I was just joking with my brother. I will treat. Today, the guards will work harder than usual, and as a little brother, it's only right for me to treat everyone to a meal."

Huangfu Yuchen smiled and said, "For dinner, we'll go to Liuxian Pavilion."

Yan Ge nodded helplessly and said, “Yes. But please don’t order too much. I truly only brought a dozen or so taels of silver.”

“How can a person who aims to achieve great things be so stingy?” Huangfu Yuchen looked at him with an unconvincing expression.

Deng Mande regretted speaking up earlier and wished he could slap himself. The Emperor and Yan Ge were obviously teasing each other, so why did he have to interject?

“I haven’t achieved anything significant yet,” Yan Ge confidently replied.

More dishes arrived, and the topic came to a close.

After finishing the meal, Yan Ge took Huangfu Yuchen to the First Company.

Huangfu Yuchen stood in front of the sliding doors with great interest before continuing forward. Yan Ge wasn’t surprised since the door attracted curious onlookers every day, and Huangfu Yuchen was just one among them.

Seeing Yan Ge return, the servants in the courtyard were about to come forward to greet them, but Yan Ge waved them off from a distance, leading Huangfu Yuchen to stroll around the courtyard and take him to the office.

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at the lock on the door. “A single lock isn’t enough for security.” Yan Ge’s peculiar ideas concerned the treasury, so he couldn’t help but express a few words of concern.

Yan Ge responded, “Currently, there aren’t any important documents. Later, we might install a secret compartment or something of the sort in this room. Your Majesty, please.” These were all lies; he stored all important items in the backpack of the system.

Huangfu Yuchen sat behind the desk and said, “I’ve already instructed someone to handle matters of Liuxian Pavilion. Have you been in contact with them?”

Yan Ge said, “Several things have come up recently, and I haven’t had the chance to personally visit Liuxian Pavilion. I just sent someone to take a look. The person recommended by Your Majesty must be very capable, and I believe there won’t be any problems.”

“No worries, we’ll go there this afternoon as well,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

Huangfu Yuchen took a short rest for nearly half an hour, and then Yan Ge led him to stroll around the streets before heading to Liuxian Pavilion.

“Welcome, honored guests,” the attendant at the entrance greeted with sharp eyes as always.

Huangfu Yuchen lightly waved his folding fan and looked up at the façade of Liuxian Pavilion. “It looks even more artistic in reality. Not bad.”

Yan Ge was puzzled. “Brother, have you seen something that isn’t real before?”

Huangfu Yuchen stepped onto the steps, his eyes gentle. “I have a brother who knows it’s inconvenient for me to go out, so he specially had a painting made for me.”

Yan Ge understood immediately. Huangfu Yuchen must be referring to Huangfu Yuhu. Their relationship was excellent, and as soon as Huangfu Yuchen ascended the throne, he bestowed the title of prince upon Huangfu Yuhu.

Manager Yuan kept his head down as usual, tallying accounts behind the counter. The person Huangfu Yuchen sent to take over didn’t dismiss him.

“Master, shall we go to a private room?” Deng Mande saw that the main hall was crowded and was afraid that someone might accidentally offend Huangfu Yuchen if they were drunk.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Let’s sit in the main hall. It’s lively.”

Yan Ge smiled and said to Deng Mande, “You don’t need to worry too much. Ordinary people wouldn’t dare to cause trouble here.”

But after a glance, the main hall was almost full, with only two or three tables having three or four vacant seats. They couldn't separate their group and it wasn't convenient to share a table with others, so Huangfu Yuchen had to let someone take him to a private room.

Only now did Manager Yuan see Yan Ge and his face immediately lit up with a smile. "Young Master Qin."

Yan Ge said, "We want a private room. Go and invite the new owner."

"Yes," Manager Yuan took a curious glance at Huangfu Yuchen but didn't dare to look for long.

The group entered the private room, and just as the tea was being poured, there was a knock on the door, and a handsome young man in a grey robe strode in. With each step, his robes billowed in the wind, exuding a particularly sharp and refreshing aura. When he saw Huangfu Yuchen, he walked over and greeted with a hint of surprise on his face, "This subordinate pays his respects—"

Huangfu Yuchen sat upright in his seat and casually waved his folding fan. "No need for excessive formalities when we're away from home."

The young man In the grey robe stood up. "Understood. Why did Master personally come out today?"

Yan Ge could tell that the young man in the grey robe had a good personal relationship with Huangfu Yuchen.

"It's been a while since I've been out, just taking a casual stroll," Huangfu Yuchen said to Yan Ge. "This is the current owner of Liuxian Pavilion, Xiao Jinran."

Xiao Jinran glanced in Yan Ge's direction, and seeing his smiling countenance, he had a favorable impression. However, he suddenly realized that someone who could sit so close to the Emperor and even have the Emperor personally introduce him must not be an ordinary person. He quickly shifted his gaze to avoid any offense.

“In the future, if there are any business matters, you can contact him,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

“Understood,” Yan Ge stood up and bowed to Xiao Jinran. “My surname is Qin. I hope we can have a good relationship in the future, Manager Xiao.”

“Definitely,” Xiao Jinran became even more certain that this young nobleman’s identity was extraordinary, and he readily agreed.

“Go about your business,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

“Yes, this subordinate will take his leave.”

After Xiao Jinran left, the dishes they ordered quickly arrived. Just as they began eating, Deng Mande suddenly walked out and returned a while later, excitement evident on his face as he said to Huangfu Yuchen, “Master, good news! The deal is sealed!”

Huangfu Yuchen flicked his sleeve and stood up. “Let’s go back.”

Yan Ge’s lips curved up as he looked at Huangfu Yuchen. “I’ll go back with you.”

The group rushed back to the palace. As soon as they arrived at Tenglong Palace, Huangfu Yuchen summoned his attendants into the hall. Yan Ge stood by his side.

Yan Jin excitedly said, “Master, this is wonderful! You can finally rank up!”

“Yes,” Yan Ge had a smile on his face, “I am also looking forward to the rewards from the system.”

Huangfu Yuchen noticed it too, and there was a hint of laughter in his eyes, confirming that Yan Ge was thinking about the promotion.

After a while, a disheveled man dressed in black walked briskly into the grand hall and knelt before the steps.

“The subordinates refer to the emperor, long live the emperor!” the man in black knelt and greeted.

“Rise,” Huangfu Yuchen urged, “Report the situation.”

“Yes,” the man in black concisely reported, “This subordinate and a few others learned that in a small county in the south, a certain type of stone can prevent rusting for at least two years when smelted with iron. Unfortunately, this stone is located in a mountain valley, making it difficult to collect. I brought back a piece of the stone and had Master Li use it to make a few pens. The rest of the stones will arrive in the capital in a few days.” After speaking, he presented the pens with both hands.

Huangfu Yuchen motioned for Yan Ge to come forward, and upon inspecting the pens, Yan Ge noticed that the tips were gleaming like silver and had a faint resemblance to stainless steel.

“What do you think?” Huangfu Yuchen asked him.

Yan Ge nodded, “There should be no problem. Saltwater accelerates the rusting of iron, so we can test it by immersing the pen in water for two to three days.”

The man in black glanced at Yan Ge in surprise and said, “That’s right. The locals are also aware of this method. I have already tested the newly smelted iron using this stone in the local area, and it does not rust. From this, we can conclude that this iron is no ordinary iron.”

“Excellent! Rewards shall be bestowed upon those who have contributed!” Huangfu Yuchen’s eyes brightened and sharpened. He looked at Yan Ge and said, “Deng Mande, draft the decree.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Deng Mande took out a blank decree and dipped the brush in ink, preparing to write.

Huangfu Yuchen dictated, “In recognition of the exceptional talent and quick-wittedness of Yan Daying, we are pleased to elevate his status to

‘Changzai,’ and bestow upon them a golden fan and several rolls of brocade as rewards. Approved!”

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“Thank you for your grace, Your Majesty, long live Your Majesty!” Yan Ge bowed to express his gratitude, while simultaneously hearing a familiar voice:

— “Ding. Congratulations on successfully completing Main Mission 4 — being promoted by the Emperor to the rank of ‘Changzai.’ Rewards received are: 100 taels of silver and a copy of the ‘Imperial Pharmacopoeia.’ Main Mission 5 — being promoted by the Emperor to the rank of ‘Shiren’. Once the mission is complete, you will be rewarded with: 500 taels of silver and eight Foundation Building Pills. To accept the mission, please select ‘Yes’; to refuse the mission, please select ‘No.’”

**Ranks in their order—Daying, Changzai, Shirén (scholar), Cairen, Guiren, Shiqing, Caiqing (honorable official), Guiqing(Noble Consort) and Huang Guiqing.

Foundation Building Pills? Yan Ge’s head spun, nearly causing him to collapse to the ground. Without hesitation, he quickly selected “Yes.” Foundation Building Pills! What did they signify? It meant cultivation! If a portable system was real, then cultivation could also be real!

Huangfu Yuchen saw Yan Ge’s eyes glowing and thought he was touched. He couldn’t understand why Yan Ge would be so delighted just because he

was promoted to ‘Changzai.’ Was it that important for him to stay by his side?

His mood became rather complex and he ended up staring at Yan Ge for a long while.

–“Master, I can now tell you everything about the system,” Yan Jin’s voice was unusually cheerful.

Yan Ge intervened in a timely manner, “Little Jin, we’ll talk about it later.” He noticed that Huangfu Yuchen had been looking at him.

“Your Majesty?”

Huangfu Yuchen teased, “Have your wishes been fulfilled?”

“Same goes for Your Majesty,” Yan Ge couldn’t help but smile.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Join me for a meal in the Imperial Garden tonight.”

Yan Ge knew they still had state affairs to discuss, “Yes. I’ll take my leave, Your Majesty.”

As Huangfu Yuchen watched him leave, his expression returned to a cold and imposing demeanor. He gave the command, “Summon the Minister of Works.”

Deng Mande approached the entrance of the hall and chanted, “Summon the Minister of Works—”

“Summon the Minister of Works—”

“Summon the Minister of Works—”

The eunuchs relayed the orders one by one, until it reached the palace gate where the herald was. He rode on a fast horse, hurrying to the residence of the Minister of Works.

Huangfu Yuchen picked up a book and flipped through it until he heard the announcement from outside, “The Minister of Works has arrived—”

“Send him in.”

Gao Jingwei, the Minister of Works, was in his forties. He wore a black official robe, and briskly walked into the grand hall with his head down. He lifted his robe and performed a bow on the steps, kneeling on both knees, “This humble official pays respects to Your Majesty. May Your Majesty live for ten thousand years.”

“Rise.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Deng Mande.”

Deng Mande handed the fountain pen to Gao Jingwei.

Gao Jingwei was perplexed, but knowing it was not yet time to ask questions, he patiently watched Deng Mande write on the paper and disassembled and reassembled the pen, and he became excited.

“Your Majesty, this is…”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “This is a new invention, a fountain pen, created by a talented scholar in my Great Han Kingdom. I believe there is no need for me to explain the advantages of this pen. I wish to see the mass production of fountain pens as soon as possible. For the specifics, Minister Gao can consult with General You, and General You will cooperate with the Ministry of Works. Furthermore, the manufacturing method of the fountain pen must not be leaked.”

A man in black, General You, slightly bowed to Gao Jingwei.

“Yes!” Gao Jingwei hastily responded, “This humble official will supervise the personnel of the Ministry of Works strictly.”

The word of “strictly” made Huangfu Yuchen subtly pause. “Additionally, remember to engrave this seal on the fountain pen.” He handed a piece of paper to Deng Mande.

* (yán gé) can be translated as “strictly”.

Gao Jingwei looked at the strange mark with confusion. Seeing that Huangfu Yuchen didn’t elaborate on it, he didn’t dare to ask further and replied, “This humble official will comply with the order.”

Yan Ge returned to Luoxue Palace, suppressing his questions for now and waiting for the Department of Internal Affairs to provide the necessary arrangements. According to the custom, there should be one eunuch and two palace maids serving by his side. The department sent a young palace maid named Qiuju, who appeared to be modest and similar in age to Wan Xiang.

Yan Ge instructed her to familiarize herself with the environment first and then clean the designated areas of Luoxue Palace. He made it clear that she should not disturb him unless it was an urgent matter. Afterward, he locked the door and spoke with Yan Jin.(the system).

“Yan Jin, you can speak now.”

Yan Jin didn’t hesitate this time and directly said, “Master, now I can tell you that the system upgrade not only affects your interests but is also closely related to me.” Despite the system’s voice still having a childish tone, its manner of speaking resembled that of a mature adult.

“What do you mean?” Yan Ge inquired.

Yan Jin uttered a shocking statement that left Yan Ge stunned. “After the system upgrade, I can not only grow but also take on a human form and appear in the real world where the master resides.”

Yan Ge was completely taken aback.

Yan Jin continued, “The reason I didn’t tell you from the beginning was that I was afraid you would misunderstand and think I was pressuring you to upgrade just so I could take on a human form. That wouldn’t be beneficial for both of us.”

Yan Ge acknowledged this point. “Indeed.”

Yan Jin said with a cheerful voice, “Now that Master has obtained the Foundation Building Pill, I believe you won’t reject the upgrade anymore, right?”

Yan Ge also smiled and didn’t deny it’s words. He believed that any man wouldn’t remain calm when faced with the Foundation Building Pill. Legends, novels, movies, and games portrayed the marvels of cultivators far too much. He couldn’t resist such a tremendous temptation. Just the thought of having the ability to move mountains, traverse the heavens, and penetrate the earth in the future made his blood boil.

Yan Jin gave him some time to calm his excitement before continuing, “The Flowing Sands Sword Art is meant to strengthen your body and alleviate the pain during the Foundation Building process. Cultivation is divided into eight levels: Foundation Building, Qi Condensation, Core Formation, Nascent Soul, Spirit Severing, Dao Fusion, Soul Integration, and Tribulation Crossing. Each level is further divided into early, middle, and late stages. Once you obtain the Foundation Building Pill, you will receive cultivation techniques from the Foundation Building to Qi Condensation stages. And in the subsequent missions, you will obtain techniques from Qi Condensation to Core Formation… and so on.”

Yan Ge calculated in his mind and asked with a wry smile, “Doesn’t that mean I can only obtain techniques from the Soul Integration to Tribulation Crossing stages when I become Empress? Do you think that’s possible? Isn’t it too much of a tease?”

“Well…” Yan Jin responded helplessly, “That’s how it is. But, Master, aren’t you thinking too far ahead? Right now, you’re still just a Changzai.”

Yan Ge worried, “Huangfu Yuchen would never allow a man to become the Empress. Doesn’t that mean it’s impossible for me to ascend to immortality?”

Yan Jin comforted him, “There might be a way when the time comes. Master, it’s best to maintain a calm mindset. Even if you can’t obtain techniques from the Soul Integration to Tribulation Crossing stages in the end, with your abilities, you would still live a fulfilling life.”

Yan Ge forced a smile. But thinking about these things now was indeed too early. He took out the “Pharmacopoeia” from his backpack and opened it. “What’s with this ‘Pharmacopoeia?”

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The pharmacopoeia was not a physical book but a dynamic electronic book. Each herb was accompanied by detailed descriptions and dynamic illustrations depicting the growth stages of the herbs, making it a rare and important booklet. If Yan Ge wished to read it, with a simple thought, it would automatically flip its pages, appearing before his eyes as a projection on the screen, invisible to others.

Yan Jin meticulously explained to him, “The rewards from side missions are usually of an auxiliary nature. The Pharmacopoeia contains both medical knowledge and alchemical knowledge, which is useful for making pills for ordinary people and various elixirs required for cultivation. However, the triggering and rewards of side missions are random, and even I am unaware of what rewards each side mission will offer. Furthermore, as you accumulate enough silver taels, the system will upgrade, and your backpack will become larger…”

Yan Ge interrupted the system and turned to the first page of the pharmacopoeia. “We can discuss all that later. Right now, I just want to reach the rank of Shiren(scholar) as soon as possible.”

–“With your abilities, it shouldn’t take much time. Keep up the good work, and I will inform you promptly if there are any changes in the system.”

Yan Ge hesitated for a moment and asked, “Do you know the reason why I traveled through time? And why the system chose me?”

Yan Jin truthfully answered, “Time travel is random. As for why you traveled here—let me explain it this way—the Great Han Kingdom is a real place, and you traveled through time based on historical records. The TV drama ‘The Empress from the Future’ is a fictional creation.”

“I see.” Yan Ge laughed, finding Yan Jin’s explanation easy to understand.

–“The system chose you because your identity as a handsome young man happened to meet the conditions of the ‘Male Consort Upgrade System.’”

Yan Ge nodded. “Please refrain from using honorifics with me in the future. Speak more casually.” At this moment, he truly let his guard down with Yan Jin.

“Understood, Master.” Yan Jin chuckled.

After Yan Jin’s complete honesty, the two could feel a closer relationship between them.

Yan Ge instructed Gao Feng to pick up Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi and return to the palace, while he stayed at Luoxue Pavilion to study the Pharmacopoeia. The content of the pharmacopoeia was detailed and vivid, making it easy to learn. In less than an hour, he had comprehended the content of the first forty pages.

After practicing swordsmanship for a while, he estimated that it was almost time for the evening meal. He instructed Qiuju to prepare water for his bath and took the opportunity to instruct Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi, “There’s no need to inform Qiuju about us leaving the palace for now. Wan Xiang, you will stay with her, and make sure to discipline her properly so she doesn’t cause any trouble when we’re not around.”

Wan Xiang nodded vigorously and smiled confidently. “Yes, Young Master, you can trust me.”

Xiao Chuanzi added, “Young Master, it may be hard to hide the fact that we’re leaving the palace for long.”

Yan Ge said, “It’s alright. If she happens to discover it and refuses to be honest, we’ll just send her somewhere else.” His way of dealing with people was simple—those who were truly loyal to him would be given opportunities to climb higher, and those who betrayed him could be discarded.

After changing into his court attire, it didn’t take long for the eunuch to announce that the royal meal was about to begin to begin.

Yan Ge, accompanied by Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi, headed to the Imperial Garden.

The Imperial Garden was adorned with bright lanterns, illuminating the surroundings. As he turned past a cluster of green bamboo, Yan Ge didn’t see Huangfu Yuchen but instead noticed several other consorts. One of them was Lady Tian, and the other four were the four ranking consorts: Lady Rou, Lady Zhao, Lady Li, and Lady Zheng. Lady Rou was exceptionally beautiful, with a gentle smile and a myriad of charms, which was why the Emperor bestowed her the title “Rou” (gentle). She was the only consort among the four who was given a courtesy name, while the other three were only addressed by their surnames. Lady Rou was also the only consort in the harem who had given birth to a son for the Emperor, apart from the Empress. Lady Zhao was cold and enchanting, Lady Li was pure and innocent, and Lady Zheng exuded an air of nobility. The four of them were all dressed up, competing in their splendor.

Yan Ge didn’t expect Huangfu Yuchen to invite so many people. He sighed inwardly, stepped forward, and greeted them without kneeling.

These individuals were well-informed and knew that Yan Ge was exempt from kneeling before the Emperor. They wouldn’t dare to demand that he kneel and smiled, allowing him to skip the formalities. Only Lady Tian stared fixedly at the decorative fan-shaped hairpin on Yan Ge’s head and took the opportunity to give him a fierce glare when no one was looking.

Yan Ge just ignored her.

Just as he took his seat, the eunuch outside chanted, “The Emperor has arrived, the Empress has arrived!”

Everyone stood up and paid their respects. Huangfu Yuchen said, “Today is just a small gathering, my beloved consorts need not be overly formal.”

Who are you calling your beloved consorts? Yan Ge felt a sense of awkwardness hearing those words, and be silently retorted in his heart.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” they replied.

Yan Ge did not kneel, so he was very conspicuous among the consorts. Huangfu Yuchen keenly noticed his unease and curled his lips. In truth, he also found it awkward to address Yan Ge as a “beloved consort,” but if he was not the only one feeling that way, he decided not to dwell on it. He even gave Yan Ge a charming smile.

“Yan Changzai, come to my side,” Huangfu Yuchen commanded.

Yan Ge had already noticed the additional seat beside the Emperor’s throne on the raised platform, and guessed it was prepared for some favored consort.

The gazes of the Empress, Lady Rou, and the others simultaneously fell upon him. Yan Ge was about to politely decline but then realized that since he wanted to be promoted as quickly as possible, he would eventually become the target of their envy, so he might as well graciously accept. He elegantly expressed his gratitude and walked up the steps, gracefully adjusting his robes as he took his seat.

Huangfu Yuchen sensed a fighting spirit emanating from him and found it amusing.

There was a moment of silence in the hall.

Huangfu Yuchen, for reasons unknown, took a sip of tea in a casual manner, maintaining his silence.

Yan Ge was not the host of today’s banquet so he remained composed. He casually observed the Empress, pondering idly: If he were to truly vie for the position of Empress, did he have even the slightest chance of winning?

After a while, Huangfu Yuchen said to Deng Mande, “Let the feast begin.”

As the palace servants brought the dishes and wine, Huangfu Yuchen asked Yan Ge, “Would Yan Changzai prefer fruit wine or aged wine?” Fruit wine was lighter and favored by women.

Yan Ge smiled and replied, “Your Majesty, it would be rather dull for you to drink alone. I shall accompany you in enjoying the aged wine.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded.

A glimmer flashed in the Empress’s eyes, and the curve of her lips became shallow. She was the Empress, and even if she felt displeased, she could not show it and allow the other consorts to find amusement in her predicament.

Silently, a maid approached and poured a glass of fragrant white wine for Yan Ge.

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The Empress took the lead, and the consorts toasted to Huangfu Yuchen. When it came to Yan Ge, he took a sip and then drank the entire cup in one gulp.

Huangfu Yuchen reminded him, “This is a twenty-year-aged wine, quite strong.”

Yan Ge shook his head and said, “Your Majesty, although this wine has aged for twenty years, it is still not sufficiently mellow.”

Lady Tian covered her mouth and chuckled, “Listening to Yan Changzai, it seems he has tasted better wine than Your Majesty. Could it be that Yan Changzai is already drunk?”

Lady Rou and Lady Zhao exchanged a glance, their eyes flashing with the same meaning. They didn’t need to step forward; someone would do it for them.

Yan Ge smiled faintly and said, “Even if there were such a wine, I would not offer it to Your Majesty.”

The Empress, Lady Rou, and the others all cast a gaze that seemed to say, “You are tired of life.”

Huangfu Yuchen gestured for a maid to refill Yan Ge’s cup and asked, “Why is that?”

Yan Ge replied, “Moderate drinking is beneficial to health, but excessive drinking is detrimental. I once heard a humorous verse, would Your Majesty be interested in hearing it?”

“Go ahead,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

Yan Ge eloquently recited, “This wine, it appears like water, but once it touches the lips, it burns; it enters the stomach and causes mischief, stumbling on the way, seeking water in the middle of the night, and waking up in regret come morning.”

Huangfu Yuchen burst into laughter, his black eyes brimming with amusement. “Amusing, truly amusing. This verse is vividly depicted.”

The Empress and the four consorts, who had been by Huangfu Yuchen’s side for a long time, had never seen him laugh so wholeheartedly. While joining in the laughter, they looked at Yan Ge with new eyes.

Lady Tian felt a sense of dissatisfaction. After her gaze swept around, she raised her cup and said, “Your Majesty, in celebration of Yan Changzai’s recent promotion, it is fitting for the consorts to offer him a toast.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded.

Lady Tian raised her cup towards Yan from a distance, her smile sweet and captivating. “Yan Changzai, congratulations.”

“Thank you, Lady Tian.” Yan Ge stood up with his wine cup, downed it in one gulp, and then sat back down.

Lady Tian chuckled, “Among the four male consorts, Lady Song is gentle, Lord Du is handsome, and Lord Zhou is elegant… Yan Changzai was the first to be promoted, and surely he excels in the arts of music, chess, calligraphy, poetry, and songs. Your Majesty, in my opinion, Yan Changzai has some insights into wine. How about composing a poem on the theme of wine to enliven the atmosphere?”

Before Yan Ge could respond, Huangfu Yuchen’s face darkened, and he abruptly set down his wine cup, looking at Lady Tian. His voice had lost all warmth, “In my view, you are the most talkative.”

Initially, he had only intended to have Yan Ge as company, but fearing that the other consorts would become jealous, he had allowed the Empress and the others to accompany him, so that Yan Ge wouldn’t be in the spotlight. Unexpectedly, his plan had backfired.

Under the luminous, pale lights, Lady Tian’s petite and sweet face suddenly turned pale. Her eyes widened, filled with disbelief and grievance as she looked at Huangfu Yuchen. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she looked pitiful.

The Empress and the others were all astonished. Lady Tian was the consort who had received the most favor from Huangfu Yuchen recently, yet today he had scolded her so severely for the sake of a male consort.

Huangfu Yuchen coldly said, “If Lady Tian is drunk, it would be better for her to return early and rest.”

The Empress was about to mediate the situation when Lady Zheng spoke softly, “Your Majesty, I believe that Lady Tian has no ill intentions. She is merely curious about Yan Changzai’s talents. Lady Tian has just entered the palace, so please don’t mind her.”

Yan Ge, the Empress, and Huangfu Yuchen were all on the elevated platform, and they clearly saw a slight change in the Empress’s expression when Lady Zheng interrupted her. The Empress pretended to wipe her mouth with a silk handkerchief, hiding her displeasure. Yan Ge calmly took a sip of tea, a trace of amusement flickering in his eyes. On the surface, Lady Zheng’s words seemed like a plea for Lady Tian, but in reality, it was a subtle provocation—despite months in the palace, Lady Tian still lacked tact. But was Huangfu Yuchen unable to see through it?

Yan Ge glanced at Huangfu Yuchen discreetly and caught a fleeting sneer in his eyes, quickly followed by an expression of affectionate indulgence as he spoke to Lady Zheng, “Consort Zheng is truly considerate.”

Then, he turned his gaze to Yan Ge. “Why has Yan Changzai been staring at Us?”

Yan Ge remained composed and unhurried. “Yan Changzai dares not. Your Majesty, Yan Changzai offers a toast in respect.”

Huangfu Yuchen raised his wine cup in response, took a sip while looking at him thoughtfully. At the age of seventeen or eighteen, Yan Ge’s features still carried a hint of youthful immaturity, yet his temperament displayed a sharpness and elegance. Whether in speech or action, there was an air of dexterity and gracefulness. This male consort increasingly piqued his interest, and he looked forward to the day he would uncover the mask he wore.

Huangfu Yuchen’s defense of Yan Ge made the other consorts behave themselves, and no one dared to vent their displeasure. The atmosphere became convivial, with laughter and conversation flowing. The four consorts and Lady Tian, who had grown more astute, were particularly courteous to Yan Ge.

The Empress remained the most composed. Yan Ge was a man, and no matter how favored or elevated his position became, he couldn’t surpass her. She enjoyed watching others compete with him and found it entertaining.

As the banquet drew to a close, the Empress couldn’t help but say, “Your Majesty, Xi’er hasn’t seen you in a few days. Why not visit him tonight…” It had been a long time since Huangfu Yuchen had been to her Yongyi Palace. The Empress was the respected Mother of the nation, but because of her lofty status, she couldn’t openly vie for favor with the other consorts. If she gained a bad reputation, it would undoubtedly affect her image and position. Therefore, she couldn’t win Huangfu Yuchen’s favor herself and could only use the excuse of their son, Crown Prince Huangfu Yunxi.

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “There have been many matters recently. I will visit him tomorrow afternoon.”

The Empress was initially disappointed but then delighted, saying, “Xi’er will be happy to know his father is going to visit him.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded.

“Your Majesty, let us depart,” Deng Mande shouted.

“Yan Changzai, accompany me,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

Yan Ge walked beside him. “Yes, Your Majesty. You’ve had quite a few drinks. How about I accompany you for a walk to clear your head?”

“Very well,” Huangfu Yuchen touched his face, feeling the heat.

The Empress, Lady Zhao, and others watched them leave side by side, knowing full well that the Emperor might summon Yan Ge to his chambers tonight. They couldn’t help but wonder what methods Yan Ge had used to become so close to the Emperor, who was known to dislike men.

It was customary in the palace for consorts to share the Emperor’s bed and bear his children. The thought of Yan Ge, who had recently been promoted and might even become Scholar, made Lady Tian grit her teeth in frustration. She wished she could pounce on Yan Ge and take a few bites.

Yan Ge shivered and sneezed suddenly.

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled, looking at him with amusement. “It’s quite warm today. Why are you feeling cold?”

Yan Ge shook his head, rubbing his nose. “No, it’s nothing. Perhaps some pollen or willow fluff got into my nose.”

Numerous lanterns hanging along the roadside cast a warm yellow glow, illuminating the winding paths of the imperial garden. The familiar scenery of the night garden took on a different charm compared to the daytime, evoking a unique ambiance. Other than the sounds of cicadas and frogs, there were only the footsteps of the two of them. The cool night breeze caressed their faces, creating a refreshing and pleasant atmosphere. They unconsciously slowed their pace together.

Deng Mande and the other palace attendants followed several steps behind, carrying lanterns silently.

“At the banquet earlier, why were you laughing?” Huangfu Yuchen rubbed his forehead and suddenly asked.

Yan Ge noticed a hint of languidness and hoarseness in his voice, different from his daytime sternness. Knowing that Huangfu Yuchen wasn’t angry, he smiled and replied, “It’s self-mockery. I’ve managed to make so many enemies without doing anything…”

“Are you afraid?” Huangfu Yuchen stopped and smirked, “You don’t seem like someone who easily backs down.”

Yan Ge looked at him curiously, wondering if Huangfu Yuchen had a dual personality. The present him seemed softer than during the day, with slightly softened edges. He exuded a stronger masculine charm, and his eyes, tinged with the yellow light of the lanterns, gave off a gentle and affectionate vibe.

The Yan Ge in Huangfu Yuchen’s eyes was also different from the one when they were talking business. There was a sense of tranquility and a diminished fighting spirit, which made him even more endearing. He couldn’t help but approach Yan Ge, raising his right hand to ruffle his hair, savoring and reminiscing his first touch. Suddenly, an impulse surged within him, catching him off guard.

Deng Mande sensed the ambiguous atmosphere and gestured for the palace attendants to stop, holding his breath and quietly observing the situation.

Huangfu Yuchen leaned down and kissed Yan Ge’s lips, his tongue slipping between them.

Yan Ge barely had time to react, staring at him in astonishment. His heart pounded like a drum, and his already flushed face grew even hotter.

Huangfu Yuchen withdrew his hand, half-closing his eyes as he rubbed his throbbing temples, murmuring to himself, “I must have had too much to drink…”

Yan Ge was relieved and supported him. “Let me assist you onto the dragon sedan.”

“Mmm, my head is pounding,” Huangfu Yuchen clicked his tongue, his brows furrowing. “I shouldn’t have trusted you. Twenty years of aging hasn’t mellowed the wine enough…”

Yan Ge chuckled but didn’t dare to laugh out loud, helping him alongside Deng Mande. “I didn’t deceive Your Majesty. In the future, I’ll provide you with even finer wine.”

Deng Mande was puzzled and he glanced at Yan Ge. If it were any other consort, they would have eagerly taken advantage of this opportunity when the Emperor was drunk. Didn’t Yan Ge deeply love the Emperor? Why didn’t he seize this chance? But as a loyal servant of the Emperor, he couldn’t force Yan Ge to do anything. He quickly ordered a eunuch to return to the Tenglong Palace and prepare sobering tea.

“Your Majesty, you have become intoxicated. Please rest well tonight and do not allow others to disturb you,” Yan Ge said in a tactful manner. The fewer individuals who receive the Emperor’s favor, the fewer enemies he will have within the palace.

Deng Mande chuckled inwardly, thinking that Yan Ge truly loved the Emperor. Otherwise, why would he advise the Emperor not to indulge further tonight?

Huangfu Yuchen cast a glance at Yan Ge from his dragon sedan, and without uttering a word, closed his eyes to recuperate.

“Deng Mande, have them prepare a cup of sobering tea,” Huangfu Yuchen instructed.

Deng Mande responded, “Rest assured, Your Majesty. I have already given the orders moments ago.”

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Chunfang Palace

“Rumor has it that His Majesty invited Yan Changzai to a banquet at the palace last night,” Du Zhengfeng picked a white piece, scanning the chessboard with ease before making a swift move.

Zhou Wenhan chimed in coolly, “It is also said that after the banquet, His Majesty and Yan Changzai left together.”

Song Ruhao placed a black piece down and asked curiously, “Is that so? However… I have not heard of any imperial decree regarding His Majesty’s promotion.”

Zhou Wenhan sneered, “That merely indicates His Majesty didn’t not intend to do so. Even if he were to reside in Tenglong Palace, what difference would it make? He is no different from us.”

Song Ruhao shook his head slightly, “That may not necessarily be the case. Perhaps His Majesty is temporarily withholding the promotion to protect Yan Changzai.”

Du Zhengfeng raised an eyebrow and glanced at him before saying, “Your turn again.”

Zhou Wenhan looked at Song Ruhao in astonishment, his mouth agape, but he didn’t utter a word. His mood clearly dampened significantly.

Yongyi Palace

The Empress sat before a mirror, her face displaying signs of weariness. She languidly asked, “Has there been any imperial decree issued within the

palace today?”

The chief palace maid, who was adorning her with the phoenix crown, whispered, “Replying to Her Majesty, no imperial decree has been issued.”

A faint smile appeared on the Empress’s face, “Go inform the Grand Tutor to dismiss the Crown Prince from his studies earlier today.”

“Yes.”

…

Around noon, under the scorching sun at a temple construction site, a dark-skinned man set down his tools and said to his fellow workers, “Let’s go to the Spicy Fragrance Snack Shop and have a bowl of spicy hot pot. Its spiciness gives you energy to work throughout the day.”

One of the workers chuckled and said, “Sounds good. I love that taste! Your treat?”

“I’ll treat, it’s not expensive anyway. But you treat for the next meal.”

“Deal!”

At a bustling dock, laborers carrying bags shouted, “Anyone interested in chipping in for some barbecue?”

“I’m in!”

“Count me in too.”

…

Upon arriving at the entrance of the Spicy Fragrance Snack Shop, the group discovered that only half of the door was open. Perplexed, they entered and inquired, “What’s going on? Is the business still running or not?”

Zhao Cheng hurriedly walked out and pointed at the notice pasted on the door, his voice somewhat hoarse, “Apologies, everyone. Our boss intends to

use this shop space for another business. You can visit other shops like Old Zhang's Snack Shop, Wang's BBQ, Liu's Spicy Hot Pot… As long as they have this sign, you can enjoy the same spicy hot pot and barbecue, guaranteed to taste just like ours!"

Within less than half an hour, people continuously came to inquire about the situation. Those who could read directly read the notice, and for those who couldn't, it was read to them repeatedly, dozens of times.

This scene repeated itself in front of the Spicy Fragrance Snack Shop for several days.

The people of the capital suddenly realized that the food market in the city was mainly occupied by two establishments, Liuxian Pavilion in the high and side, and Nanyi, while the low-end food market was almost completely dominated by the "hot pot and barbeque" franchise.

***The character Huangfu Yuchen created for Yu Ge's logo are (　　), and the pinyin is Nán Yǐ.**

Hot pot and barbecue were cheap and delicious, and were most popular among ordinary people. If you buy two or three coins of vegetarian dishes, and one coin of noodles, you can eat enough. Even some young masters were obsessed with this special taste. They were embarrassed to go to the small shop to squeeze with other people, so they send the servants and maids at home to buy it. On the street, there were obviously more maids and servants carrying food boxes.

The main purpose of the renowned Spicy Fragrance Snack Shop was to promote its spicy hot pot and barbecue, gaining a reputation before divulging its recipes.

Yan Ge dispatched Xiao Chuanzi and Zhao Cheng to negotiate with those who desired to sell barbecue and spicy hot pot, with the First Company claiming twenty percent of each shop's profits.

The First Company entered the public's gaze with a momentum of a thousand troops that swept through the masses. Including Wan Xiang and others, everyone simply regarded "Nan Yi" as two words. Huangfu Yuchen did not publicly disclose that it was a "fei" character, and Yan Ge was content with it, never correcting Wan Xiang and the others.

Inside the hall of Liuxian Pavilion, two young gentlemen were engaged in casual conversation.

"Brother Xu, your Xu family's restaurant used to thrive. But now, you often come to Liuxian Pavilion to dine. I wonder, does Brother Xu have any thoughts on this?" Young Master Fang poured a glass of wine for Young Master Xu, his words carrying a hidden meaning.

Young Master Xu sighed, "What's the use of having ideas? I had someone inquire about Liuxian Pavilion's background, but they found nothing. The less background a person has, the more formidable their presence. Can one easily provoke such a person?"

Young Master Fang snorted and said, "Liuxian Pavilion aside, has Brother Xu ever tasted the spicy hot pot and barbecue?"

Young Master Xu nodded, his face showing appreciation, "That flavor is indeed unique and memorable. Unfortunately, Liuxian Pavilion doesn't sell barbecue and spicy hot pot. The few times I've had it, I sent my servants to the small shops to buy it."

Young Master Fang whispered, "It is said that both the spicy hot pot and barbecue originate from the First Company."

"The First Company," Young Master Xu shook his head, "Recently, more than one person has mentioned the First Company to me. Brother Fang, what is the background of this First Company? Its debut is so sensational, as if it possesses unstoppable momentum."

Young Master Fang replied, “Our Fang family’s pastry shop has also seen a sharp decline in business, all due to the influence of the spicy hot pot and barbecue. I plan to investigate this First Company.”

Lu Shaoling happened to pass by and heard their conversation. He turned his head to look at them and kindly advised, “I suggest you two not to provoke trouble with them.”

*Lu Shaoling is the young master Yan Ge and the others met when they were checking out the clothes shops. He got a warning from Gao Feng when he wanted to trouble Yan Ge.

Young Master Fang and Young Master Xu exchanged puzzled glances.

Young Master Fang clasped his hands and said to Lu Shaoling, “It seems that this brother knows something. How about we have a drink together?”

Lu Shaoling had investigated Yan Ge’s identity and although he didn’t find any conclusive evidence, he accidentally discovered that Yan Ge frequently entered and exited the First Company. This indicated a connection to the spicy hot pot and barbecue. Seeing that Young Master Fang seemed determined to seek trouble from the First Company, he shook his head sympathetically and walked away slowly with an unhurried gait.

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“Master, over twenty snack shops have agreed to our cooperative agreement. We have arranged to settle accounts with them on a monthly basis,” Xiao Chuanzi reported to Yan Ge.

Yan Ge nodded. “That will be all. If any other shops wish to join in the future, politely decline them all.”

Xiao Chuanzi nodded in understanding. “I understand, master.”

Yan Ge turned to Wang Xiang. “How are things on your end?”

Wang Xiang replied, “Following your orders, Deng Mama and I have taken over the newly acquired tailoring shop. We have promised to increase their monthly wages to win over the tailors. However, Liao Wencai seems to have some ulterior motives. He has been loitering around the tailoring shop these past few days. I worry he might play some tricks.”

Yan Ge chuckled softly and took out a stack of white paper from the drawer. In his gentle voice, a sense of calm and composure emanated. “What qualifications does he have to play tricks? He is a compulsive gambler who lost the tailoring shop to Zhu Yunzhi. We acquired the tailoring shop through legitimate means. If this person with the surname Liao dares to cause trouble, there’s no need to be polite. We can report him directly to the authorities.”

Wang Xiang responded firmly, “Yes!” Her master had the greatest backing, so why would she fear a gambler?

Yan Ge pondered for a moment and said, “For now, the tailoring shop will continue to operate as usual. However, the previous plaque should be

removed temporarily, and the new one can wait. I have other arrangements."

"Understood."

After giving all the necessary instructions, Yan Ge dismissed everyone to go about their tasks.

As the others bowed and left, Gao Feng and Gao Yun found their own affairs to pass the time.

Yan Ge took out a charcoal stick and began sketching on the paper. With a few strokes, a simple outline of a dress design emerged on the snow-white paper. He was drawing women's clothing. He always believed that women and children brought the most money. His next step was to penetrate the fashion market in the capital.

Unconsciously, the sun began to set in the west.

Xiao Chuanzi knocked on the door. "Master, it's time to return."

Yan Ge lifted his gaze from the sketch and looked outside the window. The shadows of the pillars were stretched long on the ground.

He put away the drawing and rubbed his slightly sore shoulders. "Is the carriage ready?"

"Yes."

The group mounted their horses and boarded the carriage, heading towards the eastern part of the city. Shortly after setting off, the horses neighed a few times, and the carriage abruptly came to a halt. Yan Ge narrowly avoided being splashed with tea.

Wang Xiang leaned out of the window. "Brother Feng, is someone causing trouble again?" Ever since the company gained fame, many businessmen sent invitations to Yan Ge in various ways. With so many tasks at hand due to the company's recent opening, Yan Ge had no time to meet everyone and

had declined some of the invitations. So these people resorted to other means.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun had already dealt with several batches of people who came to test the waters. Wang Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi also encountered provocations but they were successfully handled by Deng Mama and Zhao Cheng.

Gao Feng said, “Another fool who lacks discernment.”

A voice called out, “Is the owner of the First Company, Mr. Qin, inside the carriage? My master invites Mr. Qin for a gathering.”

Yan Ge instructed Xiao Chuanzi to lift the curtain of the carriage, and he looked at the five burly men dressed in black, towering in front of the carriage, blocking their path.

“Your master has a unique way of inviting people. Deal with them.”

“Understood.” Gao Feng stepped forward alone and effortlessly knocked all five men to the ground with just a few moves.

Yan Ge smiled slyly. “Next time, ask your master to send more people. I’m curious to see how many it would take to bring down these two capable bodyguards of mine.”

Gao Feng and Gao Yun exchanged a helpless glance.

“Xiao Shuan, let’s go.”

After returning to the palace, Yan Ge headed straight to Huangfu Yuchen’s dining hall. As a ruler of a nation, Huangfu Yuchen was indeed very busy, often retiring without having had a meal.

Upon seeing Yan Ge’s return, Deng Mande immediately ordered the palace servants to bring in the food and dismissed unrelated individuals.

“Doesn’t the Emperor feel tired staring at the memorials all the time?” Yan Ge asked.

Huangfu Yuchen closed the memorials, furrowed his brow, and glanced at the sky. “You seem later than usual today .”

Having spent a long time together, they felt more relaxed in each other’s company when there were no outsiders around. As for the kiss they shared that day, both of them tacitly forgot about it.

Yan Ge filled Huangfu Yuchen’s teacup and poured himself a cup of tea as well. He took a sip before speaking, “I encountered some trouble on my way back today, which caused the delay.”

“Oh? Who dares to be so audacious?” Huangfu Yuchen frowned.

Yan Ge replied, “Gao Feng and Gao Yun took care of it. The First Company has gained some reputation, it is inevitable to attract attention. Your Majesty, it’s best to have meals on time every day to maintain good health.”

Deng Mande quickly added, “Indeed! Your servant has been saying the same, but once Your Majesty gets busy, time slips away. Now that Yan Changzai accompanies Your Majesty for meals regularly, he can remind you as well.”

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at Yan Ge and walked towards the dining table. “If it weren’t for me allowing you to return to the palace before the gates closed, wouldn’t you also frequently forget about the time?”

Yan Ge was momentarily speechless. “Then, from now on, I will return to the palace on time and remind Your Majesty to have meals promptly.”

A hint of amusement flickered in Huangfu Yuchen’s eyes as he gestured for him to sit.

“By the way, Your Majesty, there is something I want to inform you in advance,” Yan Ge said, taking a few bites and remembering his plan.

Huangfu Yuchen casually replied, “Go ahead, tell me.”

Yan Ge continued, “In a few days, I plan to visit the brothels.”

Deng Mande’s face turned pale, and his eyes widened.

“Ahem…” Huangfu Yuchen choked on his food, coldly staring at him. “Do you even realize what you’re saying?”

Unaffected by the icy atmosphere, Yan Ge stretched out his hand and patted his back with a smile, “Let me finish first.”

“Speak,” Huangfu Yuchen said, expressionless.

Yan Ge explained, “A woman’s money is the easiest to earn. I have designed some new clothing specifically targeting brothel workers, as well as garments for noble ladies and young misses. The reason I want to visit the brothels is to find an attractive woman to promote the new clothing. There will be other activities as well. If Your Majesty is available, how about joining me? Consider it a relaxing outing.”

Though Deng Mande had been trained to remain composed, he couldn’t help but sit on the ground in shock. Yan Ge was truly an extraordinary person. He dared to invite the Emperor to visit a brothel!

Huangfu Yuchen’s face remained cold, but his tone softened a bit. “I may not have the time.”

Knowing he needed to offer a compromise, Yan Ge said, “Your Majesty, balance between work and leisure is the right path. I will make all the necessary arrangements in advance and coordinate with Your Majesty’s schedule. Whenever Your Majesty is free, we can go.”

Only then did Huangfu Yuchen nod, his tone somewhat helpless. “I really don’t know how to deal with you.”

“Don’t worry, Your Majesty. I deeply appreciate your kindness towards me,” Yan Ge replied dismissively. He didn’t believe that Huangfu Yuchen was really surprised by his behavior. As the first emperor who allowed his consort to conduct business outside the palace, he already knew he was ab unconventional man. When Huangfu Yuchen agreed to make a deal with

him, didn’t he anticipate that he might have even more unexpected actions in store?

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Huangfu Yuchen nodded. Yan Ge was a clever man, cautious not to cross his boundaries, but fearless in front of him. He admired Yan Ge's frankness and found it comfortable to be around someone like him. In the deep palace, apart from Huangfu Yuhu, Yan Ge was the only person who could make him relax. He didn't mind being more lenient with him.

Seeing that Yan Ge almost finish an entire plate of sweet and sour spare ribs, Huangfu Yuchen furrowed his brow. "Can your body handle eating so much meat?"

Yan Ge leisurely replied, "Your Majesty, don't envy those who are still growing."

Huangfu Yuchen nearly choked on his food.

After finishing his last bite, Yan Ge wiped his mouth and said, "Your Majesty, I'm going for a walk to aid digestion. Would you like to join me?"

Huangfu Yuchen's face stiffened. "I eat little! There's no need for digestion aid."

Yan Ge looked at the empty plate of sweet and sour spare ribs in puzzlement and asked in a low voice, "Your Majesty, is sweet and sour spare ribs your favorite dish?"

Huangfu Yuchen was so angry he could barely speak, waving his hand to dismiss Yan Ge. "Go for your walk and don't hinder my sight here."

"Yan Chanzai takes his leave." Yan Ge glanced at him with a look that said, "You're definitely angry that I finished the sweet and sour spare ribs," before he left. Teasing Huangfu Yuchen occasionally was his pleasure.

As Yan Ge's figure disappeared, Deng Mande chuckled and said sincerely, "Yan Changzai always has a smiling face, as if he has no worries. Your Majesty, It's nice to have Yan Changzai accompanying you."

Huangfu Yuchen calmly swallowed a bite of food and thought of Yan Ge, unable to help but smile and say, "Indeed, I have never seen him unhappy."

After dinner, he got up and walked back and forth in the palace. Whenever he left the hall, he would inevitably "encounter" a consort so he preferred to walk within the hall.

A tall man entered through a dim side door, his footsteps silent. He kneeled before Emperor Huangfu Yuchen and spoke loudly, "This subordinate pays respects to Your Majesty."

"No need for formalities. How is the situation in Chunfeng Palace?" Huangfu Yuchen didn't look at the person and continued pacing.

The man stood up and looked up. It turned out to be Du Zhengfeng!

Du Zhengfeng said, "In response to Your Majesty, Song Guiren and Zhou Daying haven't shown any suspicion towards me. In recent days, Song Guiren seems to be acting normal, but Zhou Daying is becoming more and more impatient, especially since Yan Changzai's promotion. It won't be long before he takes action. From my observations, Zhou Daying may approach Tian Guiren."

Huangfu Yuchen said, "Zhou Daying does have some intelligence, but lacks cunning. He is not to be feared."

"Yes," Du Zhengfeng replied.

Huangfu Yuchen toyed with a jade finger ring in his hand. "Earlier, you mentioned that Song Guiren 'seems' normal. Is there anything suspicious about him?"

Du Zhengfeng paused for a moment. "It's just my speculation, Your Majesty, I have no evidence."

“It doesn’t matter, tell me anyway.” Huangfu Yuchen’s caution made him realize that Du Zhengfeng might have indeed discovered something and he didn’t want to miss it.

Du Zhengfeng said, “In the past, this subordinate, Song Guiren, Zhou Daying often came and went together. But recently, Song Guiren and Zhou Daying have been meeting privately more frequently. Every time they close the door, there are guards stationed outside, and someone always keeps an eye on my Chunyu courtyard. I suspect that some of Zhou Daying’s actions are instigated by Song Guiren.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s face darkened. He walked slowly to the throne and sat down, contemplating. Du Zhengfeng was his trusted subordinate, not a true consort, so the palace intrigues would have minimal influence on Du Zhengfeng’s judgment. Song Ruhao was once his attendant, and it could be said that they grew up together. Song Ruhao left the impression of being gentle and pure. Could the palace really have such a significant impact on a person? Or perhaps, his understanding of Song Ruhao was only the result of Song Ruhao’s disguise in front of him?

“Lately, there has been too much attention on Yan Changzai. It’s better to divert some of it. I want to see what they are capable of.” Huangfu Yuchen lightly touched his forehead, his gaze turning cold when mentioning Song Ruhao and Zhou Wenhuan. “Investigate what they are plotting in secret and report to me promptly.”

“Yes.”

After Du Zhengfeng paid his respects and exited the grand hall, he looked at the night sky and a faint smile appeared on his stern face. He was getting tired of pretending and scheming with Song Ruhao and Zhou Wenhuan every day. It would be better if something happened to them sooner, as he could fake his death and return to his position in the Shadow Guard.

In the darkness of the night, Du Zhengfeng’s shadow moved like a nimble fish. In no time, he arrived outside Chunfeng Palace and, without making any sound, climbed over the courtyard wall and slipped into a side room.

Moments later, there was a knock on the door.

“Master, Zhou Daying has arrived.”

Du Zhengfeng said, “Let him wait in the hall. I will join him shortly.”

“Understood.”

MCUS Chapter 44

A scholar entered a shop specializing in writing materials, and he said to the shopkeeper behind the counter, “Shopkeeper, I would like to buy a writing brush.”

“How many would you like, young master?” asked the shopkeeper.

“Just one will do.”

“Okay,” the shopkeeper took out a fountain pen from the drawer and handed it to him, “That will be 6 copper coins.”

The scholar looked at him puzzled, “I wanted to buy a brush. What is this you’ve given me?”

The shopkeeper smiled, “Oh, young master, don’t you know? This is a new pen invented in our great Han. It writes small characters, doesn’t require frequent ink dipping, a single ink refill lasts for several days, and it’s also convenient to carry. It’s the most practical tool for scholars. Young Master, take a look.”

The shopkeeper brought a piece of paper and wrote a few crooked characters with the fountain pen. The paper already had many written words, indicating that the shopkeeper had introduced the new pen to many customers before this scholar.

The scholar exclaimed in amazement, “Is it really so?”

The shopkeeper confidently said, “Indeed. This type of pen is only available in our great Han kingdom! Moreover, it is sold to others for 12 copper coins, but for scholars, it’s only 6 copper coins. His Majesty the Emperor is truly benevolent towards scholars.” The shopkeeper was unaware of the

pen’s true connection to the Emperor but considered all the benefits bestowed upon the people as the Emperor’s grace.

……

“Once again, it’s the First Company. Lately, I’ve been hearing ‘First Company’ so frequently that my ears are becoming calloused.” In a private room at Liuxian Pavilion, a middle-aged man with a short black beard gently stroked his beard, his face expressionless as he glanced at the pen, ink, paper, and inkstone placed on the small square table in the corner. The brush had been replaced by a new-style fountain pen.

Sitting across from him was another middle-aged man with refined in appearance. He took a sip of wine with understanding and said, “Brother Zhao, did you ask me to meet you for this matter?”

Zhao Dingshan poured him a drink, “Brother Wang, as you know, my Zhao family specializes in brushes. Our pine resin brushes from the Zhao family have shops in the east, south, west, and north of the Great Han kingdom. But now that this new pen has emerged, where does that leave us, the Zhao family, in the future? Brother Wang, your Wang family alone has three paper mills in the capital city. I can’t believe this new pen won’t affect your paper mills.”

Wang Zhongru paused for a moment, not denying it but analyzing, “We didn’t hear any rumors before the fountain pen appeared on the market. But once it was introduced, the sales volume skyrocketed. Brother Zhao, the First Company seems to have quite a background.”

Zhao Dingshan smiled faintly.

Wang Zhongru curiously asked, “Does Brother Zhao already have a plan in mind?”

“That’s right,” Zhao Dingshan said, “I plan to invite the owner of the First Company to dine at Liuxian Pavilion. Brother Wang, if you’re interested, you can join us.”

Wang Zhongru teased, “As far as I know, the owner of the First Company is a young man of only seventeen or eighteen years old. Brother Zhao, aren’t you afraid of being ridiculed for taking the initiative?”

“There are no permanent enemies in the business world. Besides, the First Company is just starting out and needs connections.” Zhao Dingshan affirmed, “I believe the other party won’t refuse.”

Wang Zhongru poured him a glass of wine, raised his cup, and smiled, “Then I’ll bask in your glory, Brother Zhao.”

“Agreed.”

In the adjacent room, Xiao Jinran turned his head, listening attentively. “It’s a pity that I and Young Master Qin are on the same side. Otherwise, having him as an opponent would have been exciting.”

Manager Yuan smiled and said, “Isn’t it more exciting to have such a person as a friend and create a powerful business alliance together?”

Xiao Jinran laughed heartily, “Well said! I will leave the capital city tomorrow and begin the preparations for opening Liuxian Pavilion in other places. I leave this place to you. If there are any unsolvable problems, go to Liuxian Pavilion in the West City and find Xu Yiming.”

“Don’t worry, boss,” Manager Yuan said.

Yan Ge came out of the First Company and sought shelter from the sun under a tree. He had arranged to meet Huangfu Yuchen at the brothel today and they were supposed to meet at the company’s entrance.

The gatekeeper quickly approached, accompanied by a young servant-like boy. “Young master, this young man has brought an invitation card for you and insists on delivering it in person.”

Yan Ge asked, “What invitation?”

The servant politely replied, “Young Master, I am from Zhao’s Brush Workshop. Our boss, Master Zhao, invites you to a gathering at Liuxian

Pavilion tonight.”

Yan Ge apologized, “So it was an invitation from Master Zhao. I am grateful for his kind invitation, but I haven’t had any free time in the past few days.”

“You plan to go like this?” A tall stranger approached from the opposite direction, his voice and figure familiar.

“Brother?” Yan Ge stared curiously at Huangfu Yuchen’s unfamiliar face, getting closer and almost reaching out to touch it. Could this be the legendary human skin mask?

Huangfu Yuchen tapped a fan on Yan Ge’s head and said impatiently, “Don’t I have to worry that others will know I’m going to such a place?” He wondered why he had agreed to accompany Yan Ge to the brothel in the first place. Even if it was to guard against Yan Ge’s potential infidelity, he could have simply sent his subordinates to keep an eye on him.

Yan Ge suppressed his laughter and reassured him, “What does it matter if people find out? A clear conscience fears no slander.”

Huangfu Yuchen stopped in his tracks. “I’ve changed my mind. I won’t go.”

“Wait,” Yan Ge grabbed his wrist, “Brother, today you accompany me to ‘that place,’ and tomorrow I’ll accompany you to the Hundred Flowers Festival. This year’s festival will be different from previous ones, guaranteed to be unforgettable.”

Huangfu Yuchen looked at him skeptically, certain that he was scheming something. Otherwise, there would be no need to invite him along. Anyway, he had cleared his schedule for the entire day, he wanted to see what this guy was up to.

“Oh,” he smirked playfully, lifting Yan Ge’s chin with one hand and embracing his waist with the other. “In any case, I’ll be going with my ‘wife.’ What does it matter if familiar faces see us?” He stared intently at Yan Ge, not missing any change in his expression. Deng Mande had

claimed that Yan Ge had feelings for him, and now he was curious to find out if it was true.

Yan Ge was the type to rise to challenges. If Huangfu Yuchen teased him, he would find an opportunity to tease back. Without hesitation, he embraced Huangfu Yuchen, tilted his head back, and smiled into his eyes, showing no weakness.

Gao Feng, Gao Yun, the gatekeeper, Zhang Yuan, and Liu Rong quickly averted their gaze.

Huangfu Yuchen's heart softened, his gaze unknowingly becoming gentle. After holding the young man for a while, he patted his back and finally let go, saying, "Shall we go now?"

Having won the silent battle of gazes, Yan Ge was in a good mood, his spirits soaring. "This way," he said.

The destination wasn't too far, so they decided to walk. They didn't want too many people noticing their visit to the brothel, as it might give the impression that they were there to cause trouble. The guards remained hidden in the shadows, while Gao Feng and Gao Yun disguised themselves simply. Only Zhang Yuan and Liu Rong were visible in the open.

Each of them held a moderately sized wooden box in their arms, and Huangfu Yuchen glanced at it briefly.

When they arrived outside the Red Sleeve Pavilion, the grandest brothel in the capital, Yan Ge noticed the hesitation in Huangfu Yuchen's steps and he reached out, grabbing his wrist.

Just as he was about to pull Huangfu Yuchen inside, a gloomy voice came from behind, "Ge'er, where are you going?"

Father?

Yan Ge was startled, instinctively looking towards Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen’s folding fan partially covered his face, hiding his expression. However, his exposed eyes were filled with playful and mocking smile.

Yan Ge immediately understood that Huangfu Yuchen had noticed Yan Xiaojing long ago.

Dressed in casual attire, Yan Xiaojing was accompanied by two servants. He had just gone out for a casual stroll and hadn’t expected to coincidentally encounter Yan Ge on his way to the brothel! Moreover, he was intimately holding another man.

Yan Xiaojing’s face turned as black as coal.

“Why are you here? Who is this person? Do you even know your own status?” Yan Xiaojing angrily questioned.

Father, I am truly innocent!

Yan Ge couldn’t express his grievances, so he dryly explained, “I came here for a legitimate reason.”

“A legitimate reason? To a place like this?” Yan Xiaojing placed his hands behind his back and scrutinized him.

Yan Ge couldn’t expose Huangfu Yuchen’s identity nor reveal his own plans. He held onto Huangfu Yuchen’s hand and quickly entered through the door. “If you don’t believe me, come inside and see for yourself!”

Yan Xiaojing roared in anger, “You little brat—”

Huangfu Yuchen burst into laughter. “Hahaha…”

‘So disloyal.’ Yan Ge, who had temporarily escaped a calamity, glanced at him and prepared to enter. Just as he took a step forward, a strong fragrance enveloped them, and several enchanting and coquettish women pounced on them, speaking flirtatiously:

“Young master, you are truly handsome. I am fortunate to meet you.”

“Young master, allow this little girl to serve you.”

…

One of them went even further, spouting nonsense, “Young master, why haven’t you come to see Qin’er for so long?”

Yan Ge was taken aback and quickly retreated.

However, these girls were accustomed to various reactions from men who visited the brothel, so they weren’t afraid at all. They continued to playfully surround him, reaching out to pull him or touch his body.

Yan Ge swiftly dodged, but the scent of powder irritated him, causing him to sneeze twice in succession.

Huangfu Yuchen clicked his tongue and swiftly pulled him closer with his left hand, raising his right arm as a gesture of defense, while giving them a cold sideways glance.

The girls were stunned by his gaze, frozen in place and afraid to move.

“Are we even now?” Huangfu Yuchen whispered into Yan Ge’s ear, his voice carrying a hint of laughter.

Yan Ge looked at him for a moment before reluctantly saying, “We’re even.”

Neither of them realized how ambiguous their positions were at the moment, with Yan Ge nestled in Huangfu Yuchen’s embrace.

The girls understood the situation all too well, their eyes revealing their comprehension.

MCUS Chapter 45

Yan Ge resumed his usual composure and pulled Huangfu Yuchen to sit on the two nearest chairs. He took out a 1000-tael silver note from his sleeve and placed it on the table. “Summon the madam. Today’s expenses at the Red Sleeve Pavilion are on me.”

Huangfu Yuchen raised an eyebrow. Wasn’t spending 1000 taels of silver too generous? Perhaps the agreed-upon 200,000 taels was too little?

Upon seeing that this was a distinguished guest, the girls immediately entertained them warmly. Some went to summon the madam, others brought tea and water, a few fanned Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, and some cleared the hall of onlookers. Soon, the entire hall was empty.

The madam arrived gracefully, her smiling face resembling a blooming chrysanthemum. “Oh, what a rare—”

Yan Ge waved his hand, interrupting her coquettish words and smile. “Madam, skip the pleasantries and bring out all the girls.”

Uupon receiving the 1000-tael silver note, the proprietress couldn’t contain her delight and shouted loudly, “Girls, receive—guests—”

Yan Ge shuddered, secretly rubbing his hands together.

The girls rushed forward, but upon catching Huangfu Yuchen’s cold gaze, they stopped two steps away. Some of the girls who had been waiting in their rooms on the second floor descended with swaying waists, casting flirtatious glances at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. In the rear were several men dressed in gorgeous attire, some feminine and some burly, all equally impressive.

“Not your first time here?” Huangfu Yuchen leaned closer to Yan Ge, his mouth near his ear, his deep voice filled with danger.

Yan Ge straightened up. “Absolutely my first time!”

Huangfu Yuchen smiled ambiguously, maintaining his proximity.

“If it wasn’t my first time, I wouldn’t have needed to ask Gao Feng and Gao Yun to investigate which is the largest brothel in the capital,” Yan Ge defended himself in a low voice.

Huangfu Yuchen patted his waist and embraced him, saying leisurely, “I can let go, that is if you aren’t worried about them getting closer.”

Upon hearing this, Yan Ge found it reasonable and leaned against him at an angle.

A subtle smile played on Huangfu Yuchen’s lips. This guy was truly oblivious. With a thought in his mind, he wrapped both arms around Yan Ge’s waist, curious as to when he would realize that he was being teased. Seeing no reaction from Yan Ge, he considered it for a moment, and his hand moved to his thigh, discreetly caressing it.

Yan Ge simply thought he was pretending to be a couple in front of others to prevent the girls and young masters from getting too close, so he paid no attention to it.

A clear smile lingered on Huangfu Yuchen’s lips, but suddenly his smile froze, and the hand on Yan Ge’s leg paused. Not long ago, he had been repulsed by Yan Ge’s embrace, so why did he suddenly think of flirting with him? And why did he hold him so intimately without any aversion?

Yan Ge’s mind was occupied with serious matters and didn’t notice his dilemma. He felt a little sore leaning against Huangfu Yuchen’s waist and shifted his position slightly, leaning more naturally against him.

Huangfu Yuchen glanced down at his head, withdrew the hand on his thigh back to his waist, unconsciously tightening his grip slightly.

Zhang Yuan and Liu Rong averted their gaze.

“Young master, do you have any other orders? Feel free to speak.” The madam’s curious gaze drifted towards the wooden box on the table, wondering if it contained silver ingots.

Yan Ge patted the wooden box. “There are ten sets of dresses here. Each of you girls will try on one set and showcase your utmost beauty in front of me and my brother. If you perform well, not only will I gift you that dress, but I will also reward you with an additional 100 taels of silver. Is that clear?”

The girls couldn’t believe their ears as they looked at each other. Could such a good opportunity really exist? Just by trying on a few dresses, they could receive 100 taels of silver? As for the dresses themselves, they didn’t care at all.

The madam quickly spoke on behalf of everyone, “No problem, no problem!”

Yan Ge nodded, and Zhang Yuan and Liu Rong handed the two wooden boxes to the girls.

The girls hurriedly went upstairs to change their clothes.

In the center of the hall, there happened to be a stage. It was usually used by the girls for performances but now it was transformed into a runway.

Yan Ge leaned in close to Huangfu Yuchen’s ear. “Brother, later on, can you help me determine which dress suits each girl best?”

Huangfu Yuchen finally understood Yan Ge’s intention. He neither agreed nor refused but said, “If I assist you in selecting the girls, shouldn’t you offer some benefits?”

Will this man die if he didn’t take advantage? Yan Ge helplessly replied, “In fact, I have already prepared a gift for you, brother. I’ll give it to you when we return.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded in response.

Before long, the first girl emerged. The madam glanced over casually and froze in astonishment.

The girl stood barefoot, wearing a strapless dress predominantly orange with a peach-colored border. The V-shaped design at the chest perfectly accentuated her curves. A flowing blue outer robe, reaching just below her knees at the front and trailing behind her at the back, was loosely tied at her waist with a matching silk ribbon. Below, she wore a sheer skirt that barely grazed her hipbones, transitioning from peach to orange, outlining the voluptuous curve of her buttocks. Silver beads adorned the skirt, shimmering and swaying with each step, captivating hearts and souls.

Huangfu Yuchen only glanced at her briefly, then nonchalantly averted his gaze.

The girl performed a dance on the stage, casting a smiling glance back at Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge before gracefully retreating.

Huangfu Yuchen turned his head and noticed Yan Ge staring intently. He was inexplicably displeased, and he grasped Yan Ge’s chin, pressing his lips firmly against the corner of his mouth.

Yan Ge looked at him in surprise.

Huangfu Yuchen was also taken aback by his own impulsiveness. He turned back to the stage, his expression calm. “I am reminding you not to forget your identity.”

Yan Ge touched the corner of his mouth, feeling somewhat helpless. “I haven’t forgotten. I was just looking at the clothes.”

Huangfu Yuchen said expressionlessly, “These clothes are novel and have unique designs, which is a powerful form of publicity. It is not necessary to find a
suitable person. Someone, come.”

Gao Feng and Gao Yun, who had been hiding somewhere, immediately appeared.

“Boss.”

“You two stay here and be responsible for selecting ten individuals,” Huangfu Yuchen said before taking Yan Ge’s hand and leaving.

Yan Ge was taken aback. “But—”

Huangfu Yuchen interrupted him. “It’s getting late. We should go.”

‘Domineering.’ Yan Ge dared not voice his anger but thought in his heart, ‘I won’t give him the gift either.’

“If you don’t give it, I’ll find it myself,” Huangfu Yuchen casually remarked.

Yan Ge was astonished. How did he know what he was thinking?

Huangfu Yuchen lightly chuckled and urged, “Let’s go.”

Yan Ge peered outside, and only when he didn’t see Yan Xiaojing did he dare to step out.

Huangfu Yuchen laughed silently. “I will explain the next time I see him.”

The two left the Red Sleeve Pavilion, unaware of a person hiding in the distance. As they exited, the person sneered, a cunning expression on their face. “He has time to visit a brothel but no time to meet my master. That brat really doesn’t know his place!”

Mcus Chapter 46

Yan Ge had studied some historical books of the Great Han Kingdom. The Hundred Flowers Festival took place once a year and had a history of over a hundred years. In the month of June, the Great Han Kingdom was filled with a hundred kinds of flowers: orchids, gardenias, bananas, hibiscus, roses, hydrangeas, jasmines, cockscombs, peonies… There were dozens of varieties of orchids alone. Pink, white, orange, red, purple, yellow… They competed for beauty, presenting a stunning sight.

Initially, the Hundred Flowers Festival was indeed a holiday for flower lovers. On this day, people would bring out their beloved flowers to showcase them to other flower enthusiasts, exchanging their insights. Occasionally, they also brought their children and friends to gather together. During casual conversations, it was common to inquire about the marital status of each other's sons and daughters. If there was a good match, the two families would become in-laws. Over time, the Hundred Flowers Festival became a disguised matchmaking event. When the festival arrives, the young gentlemen and unmarried ladies in the capital would dress up in hopes of finding a suitable partner.

The requirements for women in the Great Han Kingdom were not overly strict. If they met with a man privately and it was discovered, they would undoubtedly be accused of illicit affair. However, as long as they had maids and servants with them, they were allowed to go out and move about.

When Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen arrived at Tongxin Lake, it was already bustling with visitors. Peddlers found business opportunities there, carrying loads of various snacks and curious trinkets for sale. Young girls in the crowd observed with curiosity, occasionally emitting crisp and pleasing laughter, capturing the infatuated gazes of young masters.

Some of the girls stood out from the others due to their noticeably different dresses, featuring novel designs and vibrant colors, showcasing meticulous tailoring. Other girls couldn’t help but cast occasional envious glances at them. Amidst the fragrance of clothes and the beauty of their appearances, various potted plants became mere supporting roles.

The most eye-catching among those seated by the stone table at the lakeside was a girl in colorful attire. The low neckline of her dress did not give off an immodest impression because her neck was cleverly adorned with a light green scarf, adding a touch of playfulness. Looking at her dress, it perfectly accentuated her impressive figure. There were a total of five colors: rose red, sapphire blue, fresh green, white, and black. However, the distribution of colors was skillfully arranged, avoiding any sense of overwhelming complexity, and instead, presenting a refreshing sight.

A white-clad girl a few steps away couldn’t help but walk over and bow in greeting.

“May I have a seat here, sister?” she asked politely.

The girl in colorful attire turned slightly surprised and smiled gently, “Of course, sister, please.”

Both of them had their maids and servants standing quietly on the side.

“Sister,” the white-clad girl spoke frankly, “your clothes are so beautiful, and I admire them greatly. May I ask where you purchased them from?”

The girl in colorful attire smiled apologetically, “They weren’t purchased; they were gifted to me.”

The white-clad girl inquired further, “Do you know where the person who gifted you the clothes made the purchase?”

Shaking her head, the girl in colorful attire replied regretfully, “I don’t know. However, there are the words ‘Yiyi Bushu’ written on the clothes, along with the symbol ‘Nan Yi.’ But it’s strange, I had someone search throughout the capital, and there is no clothing shop by that name.

Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge stood not far away.

Huangfu Yuchen asked, “Is this your method of promotion?”

“Surprise is key to achieving victory. Silence can speak louder than words,” Yan Ge smiled faintly. “I’ve conducted investigations and specifically selected talented and remarkably beautiful women to be gifted with the garments. Later, there will be a talent competition. Even if these ladies don’t win, their attire will surely capture everyone’s attention. After today’s Hundred Flowers Festival, ‘Yiyi Bushu Garment Workshop’ will officially hang its plaque.”

Huangfu Yuchen gestured for him to walk towards a tree by the lake. “Once the garments from the workshop gain fame, they may easily be counterfeited.”

Yan Ge hadn’t expected him to be so knowledgeable. He gave him an appreciative glance.

“Brother, rest assured. Let me secretly tell you,” he leaned in mysteriously to Huangfu Yuchen. “After the garments from the workshop are made, there’s one final step—I’ve instructed my trusted aide to add hidden serial numbers to the clothes. If any counterfeits appear, I will spread this information. By then, those who have bought the fakes… hehehe.” He didn’t finish his sentence, but chuckled meaningfully, a mischievous glint flashing in his eyes, like a sly cat.

Huangfu Yuchen held onto his shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “I award you the title of ‘cunning.’”

Yan Ge smiled, but didn’t respond and walked over to a nearby stall selling cold tea, buying two bowls.

Huangfu Yuchen stopped him. “The tea outside may not be clean.” He picked up a water flask from a nearby stone carving and handed it to him.

The stall’s owner was annoyed and raised his head, about to say something. However, upon seeing Huangfu Yuchen’s noble appearance, it was evident

that he couldn’t afford to offend him. He closed his mouth and silently carried his burden away.

Yan Ge hadn’t even noticed when the water flask had appeared there. The skills of Huangfu Yuchen’s hidden guards were extraordinary.

“You can relax completely, brother,” he took a sip of water. “You’ve changed your appearance, and no one knows your identity.”

“Just being cautious,” Huangfu Yuchen said lightly.

The crowd was heading east, and Yan Ge held Huangfu Yuchen’s wrist. “The talent competition is about to begin. Let’s first buy some silk flowers.”

With too many tourists, real flowers were too wasteful to use and a shame to pluck. So, they used silk flowers instead. During the annual Hundred Flowers Festival, sellers of silk flowers could make a fortune.

Yan Ge purchased a large bunch of silk flowers. Huangfu Yuchen found it foolish to carry so many flowers and stuffed them all into Yan Ge’s embrace. He then swayed his folding fan, his other hand behind his back, appearing leisurely.

Yan Ge leaned closer. “Shouldn’t your guards buy a basket?”

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at the flowers in his arms and then at him, smiling inexplicably. “It’s inconvenient for my guards to leave for too long.”

Yan Ge was certain he was thinking of something unsavory, and believed it would be best not to ask.

MCUS Chapter 47

The talent competition adopted a rather free form, where anyone could come on stage to ask questions, and anyone could come on stage to answer. The audience would offer their silk flowers to those they thought answered well. The person with the most silk flowers would emerge victorious. With such fame, young ladies and gentlemen who admired them naturally came to see.

The competition stage was set up, with fabric shading the sun from above and fragrant flowers adorning both sides, attracting butterflies to dance gracefully.

A handsome scholar took the stage first, a smile on his face. He noticed many beautiful maidens in the audience and his smile deepened. “Ladies and gentlemen, today is the Hundred Flowers Festival. How about we start with the theme of ‘flowers’? Allow me to recite a humble poem as an opening.”

Before he even began reciting, several silk flowers fell onto the stage. Everyone laughed good-naturedly, and the atmosphere became lively.

After expressing his gratitude, the scholar recited with a rhythmic tone, clearly confident in his knowledge. “Ai Lan — not born with a preference for Ai Lan, but enchanted by its natural beauty. My heart follows the swaying emerald grass, inhaling the fragrant scent that permeates my soul.”

As soon as the poem was recited, applause erupted, and several more silk flowers flew from the audience onto the stage.

Yan Ge waa uncomfortable with the large amount of flowers in his hands, so he grabbed a handful and threw them without any care.

Huangfu Yuchen gazed coolly at him for a while but received no response.

When no more silk flowers were thrown, the scholar smiled at the audience below and counted aloud, “I am unworthy, but I have received twenty-one silk flowers. Thank you all for your support.” With that, he descended from the stage with the silk flowers in hand.

A maiden gracefully stepped onto the stage. “I, as a humble young lady, also have a poem…”

Coincidentally, this maiden happened to be the colorful-clad girl they had encountered before. Yan Ge decided to throw the remaining silk flowers from his embrace onto the stage, drawing the attention of the crowd. When they saw that the one throwing flowers was a young master, the people around them cast ambiguous glances. The colorful-clad girl’s beautiful eyes also glanced at Yan Ge.

Huangfu Yuchen furrowed his brows and wrapped his arm around Yan Ge, giving a faint glance at the maiden before holding the latter’s hand. “Let’s go.”

Yan Ge was just accompanying him, so when he saw that Huangfu Yuchen had lost interest, he followed without a word.

The girl was situated in a higher position, to so she was able to clearly observe their interaction. She withdrew her gaze in disappointment.

The two squeezed through the crowd, and Yan Ge’s steps halted, astonishment in his eyes as he looked ahead.

Yan Su was conversing with a woman in a yellow garment. When he saw Yan Ge, he appeared surprised and his gaze shifted to Huangfu Yuchen. He took a few steps closer.

“Second brother. Who is this?”

Yan Ge teased, “Elder brother, it seems I’m about to have a sister-in-law?” At twenty, Yan Su was already considered late for marriage, and those og

his age were probably already getting married.

A trace of embarrassment flashed across Yan Su's face.

Huangfu Yuchen also joked, "Eldest Young Master Yan is not getting any younger. Perhaps the emperor should arrange a marriage for you." He appointed Yan Su as the top scholar and bore some resemblance to Yan Ge. Upon seeing him, Huangfu Yuchen quickly recognized him.

Yan Su's expression changed because of the arranged marriage, and because he guessed the identity of this man.

Yan Ge shook his head at Huangfu Yuchen and looked at him earnestly. "Brother, my elder brother may have already found someone he loves."

Huangfu Yuchen was momentarily stunned. He had only spoken casually, but he hadn't expected that both Yan Su and Yan Ge would reject the idea of an arranged marriage. He nodded slightly, remaining silent.

Yan Ge winked at Yan Su to leave. Yan Su gave him a grateful look, bowed to Huangfu Yuchen, and left.

Huangfu Yuchen casually asked, "Is an arranged marriage that terrifying?"

The two of them walked to the shade of a tree by the lake and gazed into the distance side by side.

Yan Ge smiled and said, "Thunder and rain, all are the grace of the emperor. If I were to receive a marriage decree from the emperor, it would naturally be a beautiful thing. However, my brother may have already found someone he loves. Mutual affection is even more beautiful." The wind blew from the surface of the lake, carrying a coolness from the water, which was quite pleasant. Yan Ge couldn't help but narrow his eyes and enjoy the moment.

"Mutual affection…" Huangfu Yuchen gazed deeply at him. "Is that what you desire too?"

"What?" Yan Ge turned his head and asked with a smile.

“Nothing.” Huangfu Yuchen handed him the water bottle.

Yan Ge took a sip of water, stared at the lake, and sighed with a smile. “It’s a pity that the weather is too hot. Otherwise, we could have taken a boat and sailed around the lake.”

Huangfu Yuchen fell silent for a moment. “Next time, let’s choose a rainy day—”

Before he could finish his sentence, his expression suddenly changed. He swiftly turned around, grabbing Yan Ge’s arm and pulling him behind him. He coldly stared ahead and whispered to Yan Ge, “Don’t move.”

Following his gaze, Yan Ge saw a young man with a weary face silently standing about ten meters away, holding a sword. The man wore black clothes, and his sharp eyes were fixed on the direction where Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge stood. Even his flowing long hair exuded a chilling aura.

Yan Ge looked at Huangfu Yuchen’s back with complex eyes. The emperor was an important person and was always protected by others in the face of any danger. Today, not only did Huangfu Yuchen notice the presence of this assassin before him, but his first reaction was to shield him. Subconscious actions often reflect one’s true feelings.

This gesture deeply touched Yan Ge. His mind quickly raced, and he made a decision. Why not take this opportunity to let Huangfu Yuchen know that he was skilled in martial arts? It would inevitably be revealed sooner or later, and now that they were closer, he couldn’t let this incident damage their relationship.

He swiftly moved and positioned himself in front of Huangfu Yuchen.

The shadow guards arrived swift. They stood at the four corners, shielding Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen in the middle.

“Nonsense, step back,” Huangfu Yuchen held Yan Ge’s wrist.

Yan Ge tightened his grip on his hand and noticed the surprise in the assassin's eyes. Suddenly, he realized that this person was not here for Huangfu Yuchen, but for him. He couldn't help but find it interesting and was piqued by curiosity. What had he done to offend someone to the extent that they hired an assassin to target him?

"Brother, he's here for me. Let me handle it."

Yan Ge reached out to one of the shadow guards. "May I borrow your sword?"

Huangfu Yuchen was completely unaware that Yan Ge had martial arts skills and was greatly surprised. His expression grew even more serious as he looked at Yan Ge, giving a meaningful nod to the shadow guard.

Only then did the shadow guard hand the sword over. Huangfu Yuchen waved his hand at the other three shadow guards, who sheathed their weapons and restrained their aura.

With a raised chin and excitement in his eyes, Yan Ge said to the assassin, "Show me what you've got." Let this person help him test the Flowing Sand Sword Technique!

–"Master, good luck!" Yan Jin cheered for Yan Ge.

The assassin initially thought his target was just an ordinary merchant, but he was astonished to discover he knew martial arts. However, his surprise lasted only a moment. He flew towards Yan Ge, swinging his sword towards his chest with his right hand, creating a sharp sound in the air. The angle of this strike was aimed directly at Yan Ge's heart, fast and ruthless, attempting to end his life in one move.

Huangfu Yuchen's expression turned cold. He glanced at the shadow guard, who bowed to indicate understanding.

With a sudden tilt to the right, Yan Ge swung his sword as well, but it instantly transformed into an illusion, as if it had no substance at all. The sword light pierced through the assassin's sword and fleetingly flashed

across his chest, leaving behind a scent of fresh blood. Yan Ge's entire body soared into the air, leaping backward, and his graceful figure lightly landed in his original position. He turned his head, giving Huangfu Yuchen a faint smile, before looking at the assassin.

The assassin covered his chest, staring at Yan Ge in astonishment.

Yan Ge asked coldly, "Who sent you?"

Huangfu Yuchen shook his head inwardly. It would be strange if they could find out just like that.

The assassin's face paled, but his arrogance remained. "It's our rule in this line of work not to disclose the client's information. If you want to kill me, go ahead."

Yan Ge frowned. He didn't know how to deal with this person. Releasing him like this would likely leave future troubles, but he couldn't bring himself to kill him.

Huangfu Yuchen waved his folding fan while looking at the lake scenery. It was only after Yan Ge looked at him with a pleading gaze that he gestured to a shadow guard. One of the guards pressed the assassin's acupoints and escorted him away.

MCUS Chapter 48

The minor disturbance in the corner did not affect the lively crowd in the distance.

“I always thought the Second Young Master of the Yan family had no knowledge of martial arts.” Huangfu Yuchen did not look at Yan Ge, but strolled towards the stone table.

‘Here it comes.’ Yan Ge sat down next to him, holding his hand without hesitation and looking directly into his eyes. “I never intended to hide it. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have taken action today. It’s just that I couldn’t find the right opportunity to confess to you. In fact, I accidentally discovered my martial arts ability only a few days ago.”

Huangfu Yuchen asked, “What do you mean?”

Yan Ge cleared his throat in embarrassment. “Before entering the palace, I once jumped into the lake and lost my memory. As for the reason behind the jump, I’m not sure.”

“Jumped into the lake?” Huangfu Yuchen looked at him with a peculiar expression. “You didn’t want to enter the palace?”

“It’s not like that!” Yan Ge denied without hesitation. He was now focused on climbing ranks and had long ceased to reject life in the palace. This answer was not a lie.

Huangfu Yuchen did not doubt him because Yan Ge’s desire for promotion proved it. He also didn’t suspect that Yan Ge was lying about his memory loss; he could easily verify these matters. Learning about Yan Ge’s martial arts ability, however, made him feel deceived. A deep sense of disappointment lingered in his chest, piercing his heart. But now that Yan

Ge had confessed, his emotions were overwhelmed with joy, and he felt closer to fully understanding Yan Ge. No one had ever been able to affect his mood like Yan Ge did.

Sensing his change in mood, Yan Ge smiled and let go of his worries. “Since we’re here, shall we admire the flowers?” He admired Huangfu Yuchen’s courage and open-mindedness. He dared to keep him, a ticking time bomb, by his side. Could this be what they called “using someone without doubting and doubting someone without using” in the art of imperial politics?

Huangfu Yuchen stood up in response. “Not going to watch the competition?”

Yan Ge hinted, “No need. There are too many beauties there. What if you develop feelings for someone?”

Huangfu Yuchen approached him, looking down at him with a somewhat helpless expression. “Am I so lecherous in your eyes?”

“Heh, heh,” Yan Ge shook his head repeatedly. “No, no. It’s just a precaution. Dealing with those in your backyard is already giving me a headache.” He muttered the last sentence.

Huangfu Yuchen heard it clearly. He patted his head before stepping towards a flowerpot. So what if there were many women in the harem? No one had ever touched his heart. As for Yan Ge, perhaps he could become another brother? But just a brother? There seemed to be a voice deep within him saying that was not enough. He longed to understand Yan Ge more and wanted to be closer to him.

“It’s a pity…” No camera. Yan Ge showed great interest as he appreciated each and every flower. Some varieties were unique to this era, and he didn’t recognize them.

Huangfu Yuchen snapped back to reality. “Aren’t you worried that the person behind the assassin will still pose a threat to you?”

“I’m not worried. Don’t I have the two guards you assigned to me?” Yan Ge casually remarked. “I suspect it’s a rival in business. Besides them, I can’t think of anyone else.”

“I will arrange for someone to handle it. You focus on more important affairs,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

Yan Ge bowed. “Thank you, brother.”

As evening approached, a carriage slowly entered the palace and stopped in front of the Tenglong Palace.

“Your Majesty, I will go back to Luoxue Palace first to get the gift.”

After Yan Ge left, Huangfu Yuchen called upon a shadow guard but didn’t immediately give any orders. Instead, he stood in place, deep in thought.

The shadow guard stood silently, as if immobilized, awaiting orders without a sound.

Deng Mande looked at Huangfu Yuchen with confusion.

After a long pause, Huangfu Yuchen waved his sleeve, walked to the seat, and sat down. In a deep voice, he said, “Find an opportunity to explore Yan Changzai’s true strength.”

The shadow guard nodded, bowed, and disappeared like a ghost.

Deng Mande’s face was filled with astonishment. “Your Majesty, Yan Changzai possesses martial arts skills?”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded.

Deng Mande hurriedly said, “This… The Yan family didn’t report this matter. Your Majesty, this is a grave offense of deceiving the emperor!” He hoped that Yan Changzai’s presence by the emperor’s side would bring him happiness and posed no threat. However, if Yan Changzai possessed martial arts skills, it would be a different story. The consequences would be

unimaginable if he harbored ill intentions towards the emperor. In the depths of the palace, anything was possible.

Huangfu Yuchen let out a sigh, his gaze turning cold. If it were any other consort, he would immediately arrange for surveillance of their every move, and perhaps even abolish their martial arts skills to eliminate any potential threats. After all, a consort did not require such exceptional combat abilities. But with Yan Changzai, he couldn't bring himself to act in such a manner. If he did, Yan Changzai would never smile at him in the same way again. Erasing someone's martial arts skills was easy, but erasing their resentment was much more difficult.

"Your Majesty, we must be cautious of Yan Changzai…" Deng Mande anxiously advised Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen gestured for him to stop speaking.

After a while, Yan Ge's voice came from outside the hall, "Your Majesty, Yan Changzai requests an audience." His voice, like his smiling face, brought about a spontaneous uplift in one's mood.

Deng Mande saw Huangfu Yuchen nod and said, "Let Yan Changzai come in."

Yan Changzai strode in and handed the wrapped brocade package to Deng Mande. He said to Huangfu Yuchen, "This is the new attire I designed for Your Majesty. It has a unique style that perfectly matches Your Majesty's unparalleled status. I'm not sure if Your Majesty will like it."

Deng Mande opened the package and carefully inspected the clothes inside and out.

The neatly folded new clothes were tossed around in his hands, causing Huangfu Yuchen to feel displeased. He raised his hand to stop Deng Mande and personally took the clothes, "Let me have a look."

Deng Mande wore a disapproving expression but refrained from speaking much due to Huangfu Yuchen's resolute attitude. His gaze became

complicated as he looked at Yan Changzai.

Yan Changzai didn’t pay attention to this. Delighted by Huangfu Yuchen’s actions, he walked over briskly and said, “The fabric of this outfit is highly breathable. Although the design of the false lapel makes it appear as if it’s two separate garments, it’s actually just one, which is perfect for wearing now as it’s very cool. The cuffs and legs are designed to be loose, so it will be comfortable to wear. However, in order to surprise Your Majesty, I didn’t inquire about Your Majesty’s measurements beforehand, so I’m unsure if it will fit.”

Huangfu Yuchen smiled s slightly and said, “I really like this style. I will try it on, and if it doesn’t fit, I’ll have someone make adjustments.”

“Alright.”

Yan Changzai said. “By the way, Your Majesty, I have a favor to ask.”

Deng Mande opened his mouth to speak but was stopped by Huangfu Yuchen’s cold gaze.

“Speak.”

Yan Changzai smiled and said, “Your Majesty is aware that I only recently remembered my martial arts skills. I would like to borrow some of Your Majesty’s skilled subordinates to have a friendly match and see how my skills measure up. If Your Majesty is interested, you could observe from the side.” Emperors were always suspicious. If he were in Huangfu Yuchen’s position, he wouldn’t dare to leave a powerful threat by his side. After careful consideration on the way back to Luoxue, he decided to reveal a portion of his hidden cards once again.

Deng Mande was startled.

Huangfu Yuchen gazed deeply at Yan Changzai. Suddenly, he stood up, and walked up to him, embracing him tightly with one arm while gently stroking his hair. He whispered in his ear, “Treat me with sincerity, and I will treat you the same.”

Yan Ge, do not disappoint me.

Yan Ge's heartbeat skipped a beat. Those words sounded too much like a confession. Immediately, he felt that he must have been overthinking it. After all, Huangfu Yuchen didn't like men. What he said should be that kind of "sincerity" between brothers.

"Your Majesty, let's have a match now."

Huangfu Yuchen released him, and it was evident that he was genuinely curious about Yan Ge's skills. He nodded with a hint of amusement.

Yan Ge asked, "Shall we compete here or go to the training ground? Would the guards be considerate of my identity and hold back? Or should I pretend to be an assassin?"

Huangfu Yuchen's face turned cold, and he sternly scolded, "Nonsense! Can assassins be casually impersonated? If you pretend to be an assassin, they will fight you to the death!"

Yan Ge realized that he had indeed oversimplified the matter and quickly said, "I didn't consider it thoroughly. Your Majesty, please calm down."

Huangfu Yuchen's anger hadn't subsided. "There is always someone better, and there are always heavens beyond heavens. Are you so confident in your skills?"

Yan Changzai looked at him in astonishment. If he understood correctly, Huangfu Yuchen was expressing concern for him, not about being an assassin or not. His lips instantly curved into a smile. "I was mistaken. I will be humble from now on and guard against arrogance and impatience. Your Majesty, please find someone."

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at him expressionlessly and then signaled to Deng Mande. He called over one of the shadow guards and instructed Yan Ge to change into the guard's attire.

"Let's keep the matter that you know martial arts a secret."

Yan Ge complied, changing into the guard's clothing. The guard was tall and robust, and the clothes hung loosely on Yan Ge's body. Huangfu Yuchen couldn't help but laugh.

Yan Ge emphasized, "Your Majesty, I am still growing!"

"Yes, yes," Huangfu Yuchen chuckled endlessly.

"Your Majesty," Deng Mande entered with someone, stealing a glance at Huangfu Yuchen, "I have found the top expert from the Imperial Guards and the top expert from the Shadow Guards…"

Deng Mande was considering his safety, and Huangfu Yuchen did not blame him.

The top expert of the Imperial Guards, General Yang Zhuo, was in his thirties, had a robust figure and was dressed in the uniform of the Imperial Guards. The top expert of the Shadow Guards, Cheng Jingfeng, wore an identical attire, with a mask covering his face from below his eyes to his mouth.

"Greetings, Your Majesty!"

"Rise," Huangfu Yuchen gestured towards Cheng Jingfeng, "This is the newly arrived member of the Shadow Guards. You two should test his skills."

"Yes!"

–"Ding. Side mission—defeat the two top experts. If the mission is successful, you will be rewarded with 200 taels of silver and one silver chest. Failure deducts 200 taels of silver. Accept the mission by selecting 'yes' and reject the mission by selecting 'no'."

Yan Ge chose "yes," his fighting spirit heightened by the mission the system issued.

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–“Master,” Yan Jin analyzed confidently, “The Sand Sword Technique is exceptionally exquisite, surpassing ordinary sword techniques. Master is certain to win!”

“I hope so,” Yan Ge said.

They walked into the spacious courtyard.

The top expert of the Imperial Guards, Yang Zhuo, took the lead. Both of them were accustomed to using swords and didn’t want to cause unnecessary harm, so they broke off a branch from a tree to use as their swords.

Yan Ge launched the first attack, channeling his inner energy from his dantian. His sword moves were illusory, and the sword energy swept out horizontally, resembling a desert storm engulfing Yang Zhuo.

The momentum of this first move caused Yang Zhuo’s expression to change. He soared upward like a graceful swan, evading in time. The sword energy passed by him, piercing into the forest. Two large trees made a cracking sound as they were severed at their trunks, crashing down to the ground.

Yang Zhuo’s entire demeanor changed. He exuded a resolute killing intent and lunged forward, clashing heavily with Yan Ge’s branch. They exchanged more than ten moves, creating a series of crisp sounds. Their movements became faster and faster, occasionally soaring from the ground into mid-air and then descending again.

Yan Ge had rarely had the opportunity to spar with others, but in this battle, he learned from the experience and gradually became skilled, his techniques

flowing like water. After nearly half an hour, Yang Zhuo's branch snapped with a "crack" from Yan Ge's attack.

Regrettably, Yang Zhuo said, "I've lost."

"I appreciate your humility," Yan Ge smiled sincerely.

Yang Zhuo stepped aside, and the leader of the Shadow Guards, Cheng Jingfeng, appeared before Yan Ge like a ghostly shadow. Their duty as members of the Shadow Guards was to lurk in the darkness and discreetly resolve matters that should not be seen within the palace. Therefore, they were trained as assassins, and the aura of violence and killing within them was not something an ordinary person could withstand.

Cheng Jingfeng's eyes were like two sharp knives. Yan Ge inadvertently looked into his eyes and felt a tremor in his heart. 'Not good'

Fear arose within him and he realized that defeating Cheng Jingfeng would not be easy. He adjusted his state, intending to launch the first move again to seize the initiative and weaken Cheng Jingfeng's killing intent with his own momentum.

However, Cheng Jingfeng had no intention of complying with his plan. He suddenly attacked, seemingly merging into the darkness of the night.

Before Yan Ge could react, Cheng Jingfeng's killing intent was already at his back. Startled, Yan Ge tapped his toes on the ground and rose into the air like a startled bird. He swiftly turned and brandished his branch, attacking Cheng Jingfeng. But Cheng Jingfeng's figure flickered, disappearing from his line of sight, only to reappear behind him in the next moment, having taken advantage of a nearby tree.

The two of them fought fiercely for over a hundred moves, yet neither could gain the upper hand. Yan Ge roaeed loudly, employing the "Raging Sea Dragon's Roar," a technique from the Sand Sword Technique. His figure seemed to multiply, swirling around Cheng Jingfeng at a rapid pace. It was impossible to distinguish which one was real and which one was an

illusion. Taking advantage of Cheng Jingfeng's momentary distraction, Yan Ge thrust the branch towards Cheng Jingfeng's chest.

Cheng Jingfeng swiftly turned around, wielding his branch to block in time. In the end, the tip of the branch aimed at Yan Ge's throat.

Yan Ge lost.

–"Ding. Side mission—defeat the two top experts. Mission failure-200 taels of silver will be deducted." The flat voice sounded so cold and merciless in Yan Ge's ears.

–"Uh…" Yan Jin sounded guilty.

Yan Ge stiffly turned his head, his expression sincere, and said to Cheng Jingfeng, "Can you give me another chance?"

Cheng Jingfeng's eyes remained calm and unruffled. After bowing to Huangfu Yuchen, he stepped aside.

Yan Ge turned to Huangfu Yuchen and blinked, "Can I have another chance?"

Huangfu Yuchen gestured to Yang Zhuo and Cheng Jingfeng, "You two can step back."

"Yes."

Only Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, and Deng Mande remained in the courtyard.

"Do you now realize that you're not the best in the world?" Huangfu Yuchen teased Yan Ge, who had a gloomy expression on his face.

Deng Mande laughed along. In his opinion, Yan Ge's defeat at the hands of Cheng Jingfeng was a good thing.

"Your Majesty, I've already been dealt a blow, please don't add to it," Yan Ge sighed. His silver box!

Huangfu Yuchen held his shoulder, looking into his eyes and chuckled softly, “When there are no outsiders present, you can call me Yuchen.”

Yan Ge readily agreed, “Alright.” Always addressing him as “Your Majesty” made him gave a sense of inferiority.

“Go back and rest earlier,” Huangfu Yuchen said, “I have a gift for you.”

Yan Ge replied, “I will go back now.”

Not long after he left, a eunuch named Xiao Jingzi from the Internal Affairs entered, kneeling before Huangfu Yuchen with a tray in his hands. “Your Majesty, *please flip the sign.”

*This is an act where the Emperor chooses whom to spend the night with. The sign or plaque has the consort’s name.

“No need,” Huangfu Yuchen turned and went into the inner room.

Xiao Jingzi looked at Deng Mande with hesitation, “Eunuch Deng, the Emperor hasn’t flipped the sign in a long time.”

Deng Mande waved his hand dismissively, “The Emperor’s decisions are not something we can influence.”

Yan Ge returned to Luoxue Pavilion, and Xiao Chuanzi approached him, reporting, “Reporting to Young Master, someone delivered a gift just now, saying it’s from the Emperor.”

Qiujie brought a basin of cool water, wringing the wet towel almost dry before handing it to Yan Ge.

“Bring it here,” Yan Ge wiped his face.

Xiao Chuanzi brought a small delicate box.

Yan Ge opened the box, and his eyes brightened. It contained improved toothbrushes and toothpaste. The toothbrushes were almost identical to the modern ones, with a silver handle and snow-white bristles. The back of the

handle was engraved with the words “Nan Yi.” The toothpaste was in a round porcelain bottle with the same logo on the lid. Opening the lid released a refreshing mint fragrance, and inside was a small silver spoon.

“Young Master, these toothbrushes look so beautiful,” Wang Xiang praised.

Xiao Chuanzi chuckled, “Indeed, they are better than what we made before.”

Yan Ge smiled faintly. Why would Huangfu Yuchen suddenly send him toothbrushes and toothpaste? He felt that Huangfu Yuchen must have known all along that he was the inventor of toothbrushes and toothpaste. Sending them now was probably because of the promise he made earlier, “Treat me with sincerity, and I will treat you with sincerity.” He was honest with Huangfu Yuchen, and Huangfu Yuchen reciprocated. Perhaps they could indeed develop a good brotherly relationship in this palace.

“Well, rest early, tomorrow will surely be busy,” Yan Ge glanced intentionally or unintentionally at Qiujie. These days, he went out and returned in casual attire. Qiujie must have noticed his outings. From her silent appearance, he couldn’t tell what she was thinking. After considering it, he decided not to say anything to Qiujie.

The next day, Yan Ge arrived at the company, and Zhang Yuan was anxiously pacing at the entrance. When he saw Yan Ge, he hurriedly approached, his face filled with joy.

“Young Master, you’re finally here!”

“What is it?” Yan Ge jumped down from the carriage, adjusted his clothes, and fanned himself with a folding fan.

Zhang Yuan said, “Following your orders, Zhao Cheng opened the tailoring shop after the Hundred Flowers Festival, and we have already received orders for over 5,000 sets of clothes!”

Yan Ge smirked, turned around, and got back into the carriage. “Let’s go to the tailoring shop.”

Wang Xiang hurriedly instructed Gao Feng, “Guard Feng, since you’re fast, could you please buy some breakfast for the Young Master?”

Gao Feng nodded and mounted his horse, ready to leave, but Yan Ge stopped him, “By the way, find out the price of toothbrushes and toothpaste… never mind, even if you know, don’t tell me.” Thinking about the profits from toothbrushes and toothpaste that he couldn’t get a single cent from, it pained him. It would be better not to know.

Wang Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi chuckled quietly.

Xiao Chuanzi had been quiet recently. Ever since the hot pot shop closed, he had been idle most of the time, unlike Wang Xiang, who managed the tailoring shop and was busy and fulfilled every day.

Yan Ge could vaguely guess his thoughts, but he was just one person, and there were few people he could trust. If the hot pot shop expanded too much, it would be difficult to manage. At least, after the tailoring shop was on the right track, he could explore other businesses. So, Xiao Chuanzi would continue to be idle for a while. This period would test his character.

Two guards stood in front of the entrance to the tailoring shop, standing tall and straight. Apart from them, four other guards divided into two teams patrolled outside the courtyard, vigilant against anyone sneaking in to steal samples or observe the tailoring process.

When the two guards saw Wang Xiang, they greeted her respectfully.

“Miss Xiang.”

Wan Xiang nodded and presented herself as a competent and strong-willed woman. “This is Young Master Qin, the owner of the ‘Yiyi Bushu Tailoring Shop.”

“Greetings, Master!”

Yan Ge casually rewarded the two with some money, “Work hard. If ‘Yiyi Bushu thrives, you will all benefit.”

“Yes!”

Deng Mama arrived upon hearing the news. “Young Master, you have arrived.”

Yan Ge asked, “Deng Mama, how many orders have we received so far?”

Deng Mama replied, “We have received over six thousand orders in total. The cheapest ready-made garments are priced at ten taels per piece, while the most expensive ones are even one hundred taels. By rough estimation, we can earn over sixty thousand taels.”

Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi couldn’t hide their joy.

Yan Ge, however, remained calm. “Making money is undoubtedly a good thing, but remind the workers to pay attention to the details and not be careless. Any substandard work must be redone. If an individual has more than ten pieces of substandard work per month, they will be dismissed.”

“Isn’t that a bit strict?” Wan Xiang hesitated.

Yan Ge smiled lightly and continued, “The less number of works redone, the higher the rewards at the end of the month. As for the specific rewards, Wan Xiang and Deng Mama can discuss it.”

Deng Mama suddenly brightened up, “That way, we don’t have to worry about dampening the workers’ enthusiasm.”

“It’s still Young Master’s thoughtful consideration,” Wan Xiang said. “Young Master, rest assured, Deng Mama and I will carefully consider it.”

“And one more thing,” Yan Ge said, “I am the only one currently drawing the designs for the Tailoring Shop. This is far from enough to meet the shop’s needs. You can recruit talented designers from outside and have them submit their designs to me. Once their designs are adopted, they will be rewarded.”

“Yes!” Wan Xiang and the others marveled at his idea.

Deng Mama beckoned to a nearby little maid, “Young Master, these are the invitations that arrived this morning.”

Yan Ge glanced at them. There were three in total, all inviting him to meals.

“Let’s discuss it later at the company.”

Wan Xiang took the food box from Gao Feng and said, “Young Master, have your breakfast first before you get busy.”

“Alright.”

While having his meal in the office, there was a commotion outside the Tailoring Shop.

Gao Feng looked out the window and said, “Young Master, it seems that the former owner of the Tailoring Shop has arrived.”

Yan Ge looked at Wan Xiang and Deng Mama.

Wan Xiang’s face turned serious. “He must be jealous of the successful development of the Tailoring Shop, which has become the flagship industry of the First Company. I warned him last time, but it seems he still finds the outside world too comfortable. Young Master, I will have someone send him to the authorities.”

Deng Mama pondered for a moment. “That might not be appropriate. ‘Yiyi Bushu is currently in the limelight, and if unfavorable rumors spread at this time, it will have an impact on us.”

Wan Xiang thought for a moment. “Then let’s publicize the laziness and gambling habits of Liao Wencai (the former owner of the Tailoring Shop). What does Young Master think?”

Yan Ge smiled faintly. “As long as you think it’s the right thing to do, you can boldly proceed. If you can’t decide, you can always come and ask me.”

Wan Xiang and Deng Mama said in unison, “Yes! Thank you for trusting us, Young Master.”

After breakfast, Yan Ge returned to the company, and Liu Rong brought two more invitations.

Yan Ge gave instructions, “Reply to these five people. The day after tomorrow, at noon, I will host them at the Meixiang Hall in Dongcheng’s Liuxian Pavilion.” It was time to enter the circle of businessmen in the capital.

“Yes.” Lu Yaozu, the newly appointed accountant, immediately agreed. The former accountant, Li Jinru, was now working at the Tailoring Shop.

“Gao Feng, you and Zhao Cheng go and investigate the backgrounds of these five individuals. The more detailed, the better.”

“Yes.”

Yan Ge looked at Zhang Yuan and Liu Rong. These two young men, one lively and the other steady, were both clever and worth cultivating. He said to Gao Yun, “Gao Yun, since you’re idle, how about I give you something to do? It doesn’t need you to be far away from me.”

Gao Yun quickly said, “Of course. This subordinate has been bored with nothing to do.”

“In the future, the people in the company will have opportunities to be sent out on tasks. Having some self-defense skills can save us a lot of trouble. When you’re free, teach Zhang Yuan and the others a few moves,” Yan Ge said.

“No problem,” Gao Yun readily agreed.

“Zhang Yuan, Liu Rong, are you willing?” Yan Ge asked.

The two were overjoyed and said in unison, “We are willing! Thank you, Young Master, and thank you, Guard Yun!”

Mcus Chapter 50

Two days later.

Yan Ge stepped down from the carriage, feeling the gaze upon him. He looked up and saw a young man standing by the window, looking down. With a faint smile, he entered Liuxian Pavilion.

Five people were already seated around the round table in Meixiang Hall, sipping tea. They were all handsome and elegant young men, around the age of twenty.

Yan Ge pushed the door open and entered, “I apologize for being late.”

The five stood up to greet him.

“Young Master Qin, it’s not your fault. We arrived early,” one of them said.

Yan Ge nodded and said, “Call me Brother Qin. May I know who each of you are?”

They introduced themselves one by one.

“I am Zhang Mo from ‘Pianran Tailoring Shop.’”

“I am Bai Jushen from ‘Xiangman Pavilion.’”

“I am Zhao Yun from ‘Zhao Family Brush Shop.’”

“I am Ye Ziyang from ‘Capital Clothings Shop.’”

“I am Kang Jian from ‘Kang’s Writing House.’”

Yan Ge matched each person's name with the information he had gathered. "Nice to meet you all. Please have a seat. Let's order our dishes and chat while we eat, shall we?"

They took their seats. Yan Ge handed the exquisite menu to Zhang Mo, who was seated on his right.

Having dined at Liuxian Pavilion frequently, they noticed that the food today was served faster than usual. But they didn't think much of it and started discussing business after a few rounds of drinking.

Zhang Mo was the most talkative and spoke first, "I didn't realize Young Master Qin was so young until I saw you today. I am a few years older than you, so if you don't mind, may I call you Little Brother Qin?"

Yan Ge smiled and nodded, raising his cup. "Of course, I don't mind, Brother Zhang. Let me toast to you first."

Zhang Mo also raised his cup and smiled, "I should be the one toasting you. The name 'Young Master Qin' resounds throughout the capital, and you, Little Brother Qin, are truly remarkable. Please."

Yan Ge chuckled, "I can't compare to Bug Brother Zhang. Since you took charge of Pianran Tailoring Shop last year, the sales of ready-made garments have been soaring. When it comes to Pianran Tailoring Shop, everyone sings its praises." He then took a sip of wine.

Upon hearing this, everyone realized that he had done his research on them. Despite his young age, he acted maturely, and they all put away any thoughts of underestimating him.

Zhao Yun said, "Young Master Qin, I am actually here on behalf of my father. My father, Zhao Dingshan, is the owner of the largest brush-making shop in the capital. He invited you a few days ago, but you were too busy to make time. Perhaps Young Master Qin doesn't remember."

The remark had a slightly sharp tone, implying some reproach. Yan Ge was a businessman and couldn't possibly lack tolerance. He seemed oblivious to

the sarcasm and said, “Since the establishment of the First Company, I have indeed been too occupied to spare time. I want to express my gratitude to Master Zhao for his understanding.”

Zhao Yun was left speechless, and he looked at the others.

Ye Ziyang laughed heartily with a hint of humor in his words, “I understand, I understand. Young Master Qin is busy with fountain pens one moment, snack shops the next, then toothpaste and toothbrushes, and now the tailoring shop. You’re truly bustling, but do take care of your health.”

Before Yan Ge could respond, Kang Jian chimed in, “I’ve just realized that the First Company is involved in food, clothing, and daily necessities. I’m curious, what are Young Master Qin’s plans for the next step?” It was obvious he was indirectly implying that Yan Ge wouldn’t leave any room for other businessmen.

Zhang Mo looked concerned, “It’s commendable that the First Company has grown and prospered, but with great success comes great attention. I’m afraid you’ve already gained some competitors. Young Master Qin, you should be cautious.”

Yan Ge’s sharp gaze swept across the faces of the others. It seemed they had conspired to confront him before his arrival. Zhang Mo played the emotional card, Zhao Yun was the main force, while Ye Ziyang and Kang Jian were in supporting roles. Only Bai Jushen from Xiangman Pavilion had not participated. Aside from the three toasts at the start of the banquet as a formality, he remained silent, his mood subdued, engrossed in pouring his own wine.

Yan Ge set down his chopsticks and toyed with his wine glass. “The reason I invited you all today is because I visited Pianran Tailor Shop yesterday, as well as Xiangman Pavilion, Zhao Family Brush Making Shop, Jingcheng Clothings Shop, and Kang Family Writing Shop.”

Zhang Mo and the others were not surprised. They knew that knowing oneself and one’s opponent was crucial, and they had also investigated Yan Ge.

Yan Ge changed the subject, “I once heard a story. Would any of you be interested in hearing it?”

Zhang Mo smiled, “Young Master Qin, please do share. I’m sure the story you’re about to tell us is extraordinary.”

Yan Ge took a sip of tea and slowly began his story, “Once upon a time, there was a man who owned a famous bun shop. He had a gentle wife and three sons, and their lives were very happy. However, everything changed when the three sons grew up. They all got married, and conflicts among the family members increased. They demanded to split the family and each open their own bun shop. The household became noisy with arguments every day.”

“In order to avoid further disputes among his sons and maintain family harmony, the old shop owner agreed to the division and copied the secret recipe for the bun filling into three identical portions. The original bun shop was given to the eldest son, and the other two sons opened their own bun shops with financial support. The second and third shops were exactly the same as the original one. As a result, there were three bun shops in the city selling the same buns.”

“Although the population in the city remained the same, the number of buns being sold increased, resulting in a decrease in sales for each shop. Therefore, all three businesses suffered. But the clever wife of the second son had a pair of skillful hands. She transformed the buns into cute animal shapes, and the sales of their bun shop started to increase again, becoming famous throughout the city. The eldest and the third sons were jealous and decided to follow their example. However, their wives didn’t have the same skillful hands. Before long, both of their bun shops closed down, while the second son’s shop stood strong and flourished.”

Zhang Mo, Zhao Yun, and the others pondered the story, exchanging glances with different expressions.

Bai Jushen stared at Yan Ge without moving.

“Young Master Qin, what is the purpose of telling us this story?” Zhao Yun couldn’t hold back his impatience. “Are you implying that we can’t compete with you and will eventually be forced to close our businesses?”

Yan Ge didn’t explain, “Hehe, let’s eat. The dishes will get cold. Cold dishes are not tasty.”

Regardless of the four individuals’ reactions, he turned his gaze towards Bai Jushen. “Young Master Bai, as far as I am aware, you are an illegitimate son, and it seems life hasn’t been easy for you in the Bai family?”

Bai Jushen sneered and took a big gulp of wine. “I never expected Young Master Qin to take pleasure in poking at people’s scars.”

“Scars? Is that how Young Master Bai perceives it?” Yan Ge raised an eyebrow and smiled faintly. “I have never considered there to be any difference between a legitimate son and an illegitimate son. Even if one is to be blamed, it is not the fault of the illegitimate son himself. You see, one does not choose their own birth, but they do hold the power to shape their own future. If you want to go east, can anyone truly force you to go west? If that were the case, it would only be because you lack the courage.”

Bai Jushen set down his wine glass and stared at Yan Ge.

The wine in the glass splashed onto Yan Ge’s sleeve, leaving a conspicuous stain on his white attire. Yan Ge’s smile remained unchanged as he casually brushed his sleeve, causing the water stain to disappear without a trace. “Are you interested in working for me?”

Zhang Mo and the others looked surprised.

Yan Ge continued, “You didn’t have a chance to be involved in the Bai family’s business originally. The reason you sent me the invitation was because your elder brother believed that my background was profound and convincing me would be impossible. So he deliberately recommended you to your father. There’s no need to look at me with a guarded gaze, these things are easy to find out, aren’t they?”

The wariness In Bai Jushen’s eyes gradually faded, and he fell silent.

Yan Ge leisurely waved his folding fan. “The Bai family’s wealth is not insignificant, but has Young Master Bai ever considered creating your own wealth? Perhaps even more than what the Bai family possesses? Here, no one will suppress you, and no one will plot against you. You can fully unleash your business talents.”

Having said what needed to be said, Yan Ge refrained from further words. “Everyone, please. We are all young individuals, there is no need to be overly concerned with formalities. Let’s relax.”

“Please, please…” Zhang Mo, Zhao Yun, Ye Ziyang, and Kang Jian looked at him with complex expressions.

Bai Jushen slowly finished his drink and asked, “Why me? You don’t even know me.”

Yan Ge replied, “That’s not important. What matters is that you need an opportunity, and I need manpower. Of course, this is an investment, and when I find that you are not worthy of my investment… heh. You can take your time to consider. The doors of the First Company are always open to you.”

He filled the glasses of everyone at the table and stood up with his wine glass. “It has been a pleasure to meet all of you. I offer a final toast to each of you.”

After finishing his drink in one go, he said, “Please enjoy your meal. I have settled the bill. I have other matters to attend to, so I’ll take my leave first. We can gather again if the opportunity arises.”

The others were left stunned by his decisiveness as they stood up and watched him depart.

Zhang Mo, Zhao Yun, Ye Ziyang, and Kang Jian all turned their gaze towards Bai Jushen, who remained seated without moving.

Ye Ziyang smiled playfully and said, “Young Master Bai, perhaps you can take this opportunity to infiltrate the First Company and collaborate with us, bringing it down from the inside.”

Kang Jian looked at him in surprise. “Are you serious or joking?”

Ye Ziyang grinned and popped a succulent piece of chicken into his mouth. “Mmm, delicious. The dishes at Liuxian Pavilion are truly exquisite. Are you hoping for my serious answer or my joking answer?”

Kang Jian remained silent.

Zhao Yun snorted lightly. “I believe it’s a splendid idea.”

Zhang Mo offered a reminder, “Let’s not forget about the unfathomable background of the First Company.”

Bai Jushen abruptly stood up,and without saying another word, swiftly opened the door, and exited.

Yan Ge’s carriage was soon halted by a group of individuals. He withdrew his thoughts from the Pharmacopoeia resting in his hands and lifted the curtain to observe Bai Jushen.

Bai Jushen stated, “Boss Qin, I need to inform my mother before proceeding.” His address of “Boss Qin” already revealed his decision.

Yan Ge nodded with a smile. “Of course. You can continue living at home, or if you prefer, staying at the company is also an option.”

“I won’t disappoint you.” Bai Jushen concluded with his final words and swiftly departed.

Yan Ge instructed Xiao Shuanzi, “Let’s return home.”

Yan Su had taken the day off, and was in the courtyard, meticulously arranging flower branches for Madam Yan.

“Second Brother, you’re back.” Yan Su looked at him with confusion as he hurriedly walked in. “Is something urgent?”

“Not really,” Yan Ge whispered, “Something just occurred to me all of a sudden. Being the youngest in the family, I should be addressed as ‘Young Master,’ but everyone calls me “second young master” and you call me ‘Second Brother.’ Does that mean we have other siblings?” In reality, what he wanted to ask was whether Yan Xiaojing had a concubine.

Yan Su paused, gazing helplessly at him. “What are you thinking? After your birth, no one knew if Father and Mother will have more children so the servants all refer to you as ‘Second Young Master Second.’ Do you understand?”

“That’s good, then.” Yan Ge smiled in relief. He preferred keeping the family relationships simple. Otherwise, with palace intrigues within the palace and domestic disputes at home, wouldn’t it exhaust him?

As he turned around, he caught sight of Yan Xiaojing glaring at him with a stern expression.

Yan Ge froze. “Father…” Why was he so unlucky?

MCUS Chapter 51

Yan Xiaojing's thoughts drifted to the events after today's morning court session.

"Master Yan, please wait."

It was Song Chaobang who called out to Yan Xiaojing. In his fifties, he appeared spirited. He had once been the tutor of the current Emperor, Huangfu Yuchen, as well as the current Crown Prince, Huang Fuxi. He held the position of the Crown Prince's Tutor, so he was high-ranking official of the first rank. Being the tutor of two Crown Princes, he commanded great respect.

Yan Xiaojing halted his steps and respectfully bowed to him. "So it is Tutor Song."

Song Chaobang chuckled, amiable and approachable. "Let's walk together."

"Tutor Song, please." Yan Xiaojing walked side by side with him, feeling somewhat puzzled. After distancing themselves from the other officials, he asked, "Does Tutor Song have anything to say to me?"

Song Chaobang patted his shoulder, smiling. "I wanted to congratulate Master Yan. After completing the Crown Prince's lessons today, I happened to encounter Song Guiren. I heard that your son, Yan Changzai, has recently gained the Emperor's favor, not only residing in the Imperial Tenglong Palace but also accompanying the Emperor day and night. Isn't that a cause for great joy?"

"The phrase 'accompanying the Emperor day and night' did not sound pleasant. However, considering Tutor Song's higher official rank and his

previous role as the Emperor's tutor, Yan Xiaojing dared not easily offend him and could only force a smile without uttering a word.

Song Chaobang said, "I called out to Master Yan to exchange greetings and, if you happen to encounter Yan Changzai, I hope you can talk to him and show some care to Song Guiren. I appreciate your help, Master Yan."

Yan Xiaojing maintained his composure and respectfully replied, "Tutor Song holds me in high regard. Yan Changzai resides in the harem, while I am an outsider. How would I have the opportunity to meet Yan Changzai? Moreover, Song Guiren's status is far superior to Yan Changzai's. There is no need for Yan Changzai's care."

Song Chaobang silently gazed at him for a moment, then laughed out loud. "Master Yan makes a valid point. It seems I have made a mistake. However, being favored in the harem has never been a good thing. If Master Yan has any message you wish to convey to your son, I can pass it on. Oh, I have other matters to attend to. I'll take my leave."

He stroked his beard, smiled faintly at Yan Xiaojing, and turned to leave.

Yan Ge looked at Yan Xiaojing, who seemed lost in thought. "Father, what are you thinking about?"

"Nothing," Yan Xiaojing snapped back to reality, glared at him, and asked, "Remember to check if there's anyone around before speaking ill or doing wrong!"

After saying that, he flicked his sleeves and left.

Yan Ge looked puzzled, staring at Yan Su. "When did I speak ill or do wrong?"

Yan Su raised an eyebrow, lost in thought. Why did he feel there was something more to his father's words?

In the afternoon, after meeting with Bai Jushen and arranging tasks for him, he spent two hours studying the Pharmacopoeia in his office, then returned

to the palace.

Inside Tenglong Palace, whenever Yan Changzai appeared, palace maids and eunuchs would automatically retreat outside.

Huangfu Yuchen noticed that Yan Ge returned early today and casually asked, “So early today?”

Yan Ge inwardly shook his head. Every time he came, Huangfu Yuchen would be reading memorial reports. Being an emperor seemed truly exhausting. “I’m resting tomorrow, so I decided to come back early today as well.”

“Resting? Are you done with your work?” Huangfu Yuchen put down his pen, stretching his sore shoulders.

“For the time being.” Yan Ge pointed at Huangfu Yuchen shoulders, “Yuchen, would you like me to show you something?” He had studied the acupoints and massage techniques for improving blood circulation in the pharmacopoeia and decided to use Huangfu Yuchen as a guinea pig. This was also a chance to butter him up.

Deng Mande tried his best to act invisible.

The word “Yuchen” slipped out naturally, and it warmed Huangfu Yuchen’s heart. “Why not? What’s the harm?”

Yan Ge tilted his head, not looking at the memorial reports on the table, and reached out to close them before walking behind Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen smiled slightly. Then, a pair of hands landed on his shoulders, gripping the muscles firmly and lifting them up and down rhythmically.

“You should try balancing work and rest. Being so busy every day is too exhausting. I’ve thought about it, from now on, you will give yourself a day off every ten days. Is it comfortable?”

“Mmm…” Huangfu Yuchen half-closed his eyes. “A bit firmer… Mmm… Good…”

A man’s voice could be lethal when it was too pleasant. Yan Ge’s hands trembled, his face flushed, and he shook his head to clear his mind of distracting thoughts.

“Why did you stop? Continue,” Huangfu Yuchen urged.

Yan Ge had no choice but to continue massaging. “What do you think of my suggestion? Officials have their rest days, and as the emperor, you should have them too.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. “Summer is the flood season in the south, so there are more reports from the local areas than usual. From now on, We’ll rest on the first and tenth day of each month. Why don’t you schedule your rest days on those days as well?”

“Alright.”

Huangfu Yuchen relaxed, leaning back in his chair. “The Chunfeng Palace sent you an invitation. Shall We have them turned away?”

Yan Ge shrugged. “This is the fourth time, isn’t it? I’m afraid if I don’t see them again, they might burst into the Tenglong Palace.”

“We’d like to see who dares,” Huangfu Yuchen opened his eyes, a cold glint flashing through them. “If you don’t want to deal with them, you don’t have to agree. We’ll take care of it.”

Yan Ge felt comforted. Huangfu Yuchen was standing up for him, which meant he was starting to value him more. After giving it some thought, Yan Ge decided to prevent Huangfu Yuchen from meeting Song Ruohao and the others. “It’s better to meet them. You’re already busy with state affairs every day. I’ll meet them first, and if they still… I won’t bother with them.”

“Do as you wish,” Huangfu Yuchen acquiesced, seeing his determination.

After dinner, Yan Ge decided to return to Luoxue Palace.

Huangfu Yuchen wanted to say something but ended up just watching Yan Ge leave. It seemed he was becoming more and more accustomed to Yan Ge's presence. He wasn't sure if it was good or bad, but deep down, he hoped that Yan Ge would stay by his side for a longer time.

Deng Mande kept his head down in silence. As an observer, he could see that the emperor had developed some feelings for Yan Changzai, something that had never happened with any other palace consort. But he couldn't say anything; the emperor had to discover it for himself. If the emperor couldn't see it, then the emperor and Yan Changzai would miss their chance.

"Your Majesty, someone from the Internal Affairs has arrived," a eunuch reported.

"Tell them they're not needed," Huangfu Yuchen said softly.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Tenglong Palace was the emperor's sleeping quarters and not suitable for receiving guests. As for the Chunfeng Palace, there was no longer a place for Yan Ge there. Following Huangfu Yuchen's suggestion, Yan Ge decided to host Song Ruohao, Du Zhengfeng, and Zhou Wenhuan at the Tingyu Pavilion. The Tingyu Pavilion was a large gazebo, much larger than the average one, surrounded by trees, making it much cooler than other locations.

The banquet took place on a rainy day, with misty rain veiling the surroundings, softening the summer heat and creating a more pleasant atmosphere.

To prevent the possibility of Zhou Wenhuan mocking him for becoming arrogant after his promotion, Yan Ge arrived a bit earlier with Wan Xiang and Qiuju. Taking advantage of the others' delayed arrival, he continued studying the pharmacopoeia."

Song Ruohao, Du Zhengfeng, and Zhou Wenhuan didn't intentionally arrive late; they were just slightly delayed and arrived together.

Zhou Wenhuan’s gaze fell on Yan Changzai’s attire, and he struggled to conceal his envy.

The four of them exchanged greetings, took their seats in order: Song Ruohao, Du Zhengfeng, Yan Ge, and Zhou Wenhuan. Both Du Zhengfeng and Yan Ge held the title of Changzai, but Du Zhengfeng had it longer.

–“Ding… Side Mission: Eliminate Love Rivals. Send Song Guiren, Du Changzai, and Zhou Daying to the Cold Palace. Time limit: one year. Reward for each elimination: 400 taels of silver, one silver box. Failure penalty: deduction of 400 taels of silver per person. Accept the mission: ‘Yes’ or refuse the mission: ‘No’.”

Yan Ge rubbed his forehead and secretly asked, “Little Jin, 200 taels were deducted last time, and I don’t have 400 taels now. What will happen if it becomes a negative value?”

–Yan Jin replied casually, “If it becomes a negative value, it will affect the system’s functionality, but it’s okay. You can recharge. Master, don’t worry. It’s just a piece of cake for someone as formidable as you to eliminate three love rivals.”

Yan Ge sighed helplessly and chose “Yes,”.

‘Sorry, Song Ruohao, Du Zhengfeng, Zhou Wenhuan. Hopefully, the system won’t make me send all the consorts to the Cold Palace except for you.”

The delicious food ordered from the Imperial Kitchen was quickly served by the palace maids.

As soon as the dishes were served, Zhou Wenhuan couldn’t help but say, “It’s not easy to meet Yan Changzai now that he has a different status.”

Yan Ge pushed the matter onto Huangfu Yuchen. “Living in the Tenglong Palace with His Majesty, I’m already overwhelmed. I’m afraid frequent visits would disturb His Majesty. I can only host the three of you here with

His Majesty's permission. If I have offended in any way, I ask for forgiveness from Song Guiren, Du Changzai, and Zhou Daying."

Zhou Wenhuan almost suffocated upon hearing those words but managed to maintain his composure. "How can that be? Yan Changzai is now highly regarded by His Majesty."

Song Ruohao intervened to ease the tension. "Rainy days can dampen one's mood. Let us raise our glasses in celebration of the past, when we all resided in the Chunfeng Palace, and take the first drink."

Zhou Wenhuan regained his composure and smiled apologetically at Yan Ge. "Yan Changzai, I apologize for my earlier rudeness. Please do not take it to heart."

Yan Ge smiled and responded, "No need to worry. Let's drink."

After finishing their glasses, Du Zhengfeng spoke, "Yan Changzai, I believe you have already guessed our purpose here."

Yan Ge shook his head, feigning ignorance. "Please, Du Changzai, speak plainly."

Song Ruohao personally poured a glass for Yan Ge. "Yan Changzai, you are well aware of the reason, despite pretending not to know."

Zhou Wenhuan slammed the stone table and glared at Yan Ge. "Since that's the case, let's speak plainly. Yan Changzai, we hope you can introduce us to His Majesty."

Yan Ge fell silent.

Song Ruohao spoke gently, his words penetrating deep into one's heart. "Yan Changzai, I know what you are thinking. You are worried that we will take away your favor. But who is to say that we three are the only ones who can compete with you for His Majesty's attention? We do not wish to compete with you, but in this palace, without His Majesty's favor, one can

only end up lonely. That would be too dreadful. Why not be more generous, Yan Changzai?"

"Once the three of us also rise in status, we can even join forces with Yan Changzai. What does Yan Changzai think of this?"

Yan Ge apologized, "Song Guiren, Du Changzai, Zhou Daying, you have put Yan Ge in a difficult position. Although I reside in the Tenglong Palace, I have hardly had the opportunity to meet His Majesty. Ah, please don't mock me but Yan Changzai has yet to…"

Zhou Wenhuan interrupted him in disbelief, "Are you saying you have never shared the bed with him?"

Yan Ge nodded. The fact that he had not been intimate with Huangfu Yuchen was the truth, and there was no reason to hide it.

Both Song Ruohao and Du Zhengfeng looked at him in astonishment.

Zhou Wenhuan couldn't believe it. "That's impossible. If you have not shared the bed with him, why would His Majesty keep you in the Tenglong Palace?"

Yan Ge smiled faintly. "His Majesty's intentions are beyond my speculation."

Xing'er approached to pour the wine but accidentally dropped the wine jug, shattering it on the ground. The shards scattered everywhere, and Yan Ge's clothes were splashed.

She quickly knelt down to pick up the broken pieces, repeatedly apologizing, "Apologies, young masters, apologies…"

Zhou Wenhan was agitated, and he became even more irritable when he saw this, frowning, and scolded: "What are you thinking about absent-mindedly?

"I will clean up immediately." Xing'er bit her lip, holding the shards in her hands, and quickly left. As she passed by Yan Ge, she stumbled and fell into

his arms.

“Hiss!” Yan Ge exclaimed, feeling a warm liquid sliding down his cheek.

“Ah!” Zhou Wenhuan gasped, staring at his face.

Du Zhengfeng stood up abruptly, looking at Yan Ge in shock.

Wan Xiang and Qiuju hurriedly supported Yan Ge, using a handkerchief to dab his face. “Master, your face…”

“How dare you!” A cold, angry shout echoed from nearby. Huangfu Yuchen stood by the flower bushes, his face livid, his intimidating gaze fixed on Xing’er.

I at times change the titles from those on the raws because when they give spoilers. The actual title for this chapter is “Disfigurement”.

MCUS Chapter 52

Xing’er knelt on the ground, trembling in fear.

“Xuan, get the physician!” Huangfu Yuchen hurriedly walked over, embraced Yan Ge as he stood up, and held his chin in one hand. With his other hand, he gently moved his hand away, his brow furrowing with evident distress in his eyes. “Let me see.”

*Xuan is Du Zhengfeng.

Xing’er’s strike had indeed been fierce. There was a bloody trail from the corner of Yan Ge’s left eye down to below his ear, the scarlet blood shocking. It felt as if Huang Fuyuchen’s heart had been sliced as well.

Yan Ge opened his mouth, and his cheek stung with a burning sensation. He could only speak softly, “Your Majesty, why have you come?” It was his own fault for being unprepared, which led to such suffering. Xing’er was the same age as Wang Xiang, and she was petite and delicate, like a little Lolita. Who could have imagined that she would be so ruthless?

Song Ruohao looked at Zhou Wenhuan in shock and exclaimed, “Zhou Daying, your heart is so cruel!”

“It’s not—” Zhou Wenhuan began to speak, but before he could finish, Huangfu Yuchen struck him in the chest with a palm. He let out a miserable cry and flew four or five meters away, falling to the ground unconscious.

“Guards! Take him to the Cold Palace!”

Huangfu Yuchen gritted his teeth as he looked at Yan Ge, his mood reaching the point of extreme distress. He held Yan Ge in his arms, his anger evident, and said, “We won’t let anything happen to you.”

Song Ruohao looked at their intimate posture, unable to believe his eyes.

Yan Ge struggled uncomfortably. “I didn’t—”

“Don’t move!” Huangfu Yuchen warned sternly, taking him away in big strides. Before leaving, he cast a cold glance at Du Zhengfeng.

Du Zhengfeng had nothing to say and bowed his head deeply.

“Execute that palace maid!” Huang Fuyuchen ordered coldly to Deng Mande.

“Yes.”

Yan Ge hurriedly interjected, “Wait. Your Majesty, isn’t it too hasty to determine Zhou Daying and Xing’er’s guilt based solely on Song Guren’s words? Although Xing’er is indeed Zhou Daying’s person, anyone in the palace could have bribed her.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s anger subsided slightly. “We was blinded by anger. Fine, you don’t have to worry about this matter. Deng Mande!”

“Your servant understands.”

Yan Ge felt a slight lightness in his body and caught a glimpse of the trees around them flashing by. He realized that Huangfu Yuchen had actually utilized light-footed martial arts.

“You also know martial arts?”

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at him, somewhat helpless. At such a time, there was still room for him to pay attention to this matter. “When did We say We didn’t know martial arts? It’s just that We can’t compare to you.”

Back at Tenglong Palace, Huangfu Yuchen carefully examined Yan Ge’s wound once again. Seeing that the blood was still seeping out, his chest felt tight and he reassured, “Don’t worry, the most skilled physicians in the world are in the imperial Hospital. We also have the best scar-removal medicine in the palace. There will definitely be no scars left.”

Yan Ge pressed against the handkerchief, smiling in agreement. Although men didn't care much about appearance, no one would enjoy having an ugly scar on their face.

His smile at this moment filled Huangfu Yuchen's heart with bitterness. He raised his palm and rubbed his head, his mind filled with a dense gloom when he thought of Zhou Wenhuan and that palace maid.

"The physician has arrived—"

"So quickly?" Yan Ge's words fell, and he saw a dark figure flying in with a person in tow.

The dark figure was a shadow guard.

Huangfu Yuchen stopped the physician from performing a salute. "Physician, come and check Yan Changzai's injury immediately."

Deng Mande rushed in panting, "Please forgive me, Your Majesty. I was worried that the delay would worsen Yan Changzai's condition, so I took the liberty of summoning the shadow guard."

Huangfu Yuchen looked at him in approval. "What's the crime? Stand up."

"Your Majesty."

Physician Zhang examined Yan Ge's injury, swiftly applied medicine and bandaged it, then regretfully said, "Reporting to Your Majesty, Yan Changzai's injury is not serious, but the wound is somewhat deep. I'm afraid it will leave a scar."

Huang Fuyuchen's hand that supported Yan Ge's shoulder suddenly exerted more force. "Leave a scar? We spend so much silver to support all of you, yet you can't even resolve a scar?"

"Please forgive me, Your Majesty!" Physician Zhang hastily knelt down.

Yan Ge patted Huangfu Yuchen's hand gently. "It's not Physician Zhang's fault."

He remained calm, which made Huangfu Yuchen even more distressed. He angrily shouted at Physician Zhang, “Leave!”

Poor Physician Zhang, despite his age, crawled away in a hurry.

Yan Ge felt something on his face and instinctively reached out to touch it, but Huangfu Yuchen stopped his hand. “Don’t scratch. We have the best scar-removal medicine in the palace. Regular application should be effective.”

Yan Ge remained silent, neither confirming nor denying.

Huangfu Yuchen sat down next to him and embraced his waist. “No matter who instructed that palace maid, they will pay the price! Should We interrogate her and Zhou Wenhuan now, or would you like to witness it?”

Yan Ge was about to break free, but Huangfu Yuchen’s words caught his attention. “Yes.”

“Deng Mande.”

Deng Mande shouted, “Bring Zhou Wenhuan and the palace maid, Xing’er, here.”

Xing’er, with a pale face and tear-streaked cheeks, entered and immediately prostrated herself on the ground, resigned to her fate.

Zhou Wenhuan was still unconscious. Deng Mande signaled to a eunuch who was carrying him, and the eunuch twisted Zhou Wenhuan’s arm forcefully.

Zhou Wenhuan regained consciousness and looked around in confusion. He saw two people sitting side by side on a soft couch, one of them dressed in a bright yellow imperial robe.

He finally laid eyes on the Emperor and his eyes lit up, but when he met Huangfu Yuchen’s icy gaze, he immediately remembered what had happened before he fainted. He fell to the ground, pleading, “Your Majesty, I have been wronged! Wronged!”

Huangfu Yuchen kicked him, causing Zhou Wenhuan to grit his teeth in pain. He cast a resentful glance at Huangfu Yuchen but dared not utter a word. Then he turned his gaze to Xing'er and slapped her across the face with a crisp sound.

"It's all this wretched woman's fault, Your Majesty! Xing'er, what exactly happened? Is someone deliberately framing me?" Zhou Wenhuan exclaimed.

"My lord, why did you cross the river and tear down the bridge? Isn't it you who ordered this slave?" Xing'er let out a miserable laugh and said in a low voice.

"You're talking nonsense!" Zhou Wenhuan was shocked, staring angrily at Xing'er.

Yan Ge frowned. He didn't call them here to see them accuse each other. He turned to Huangfu Yuchen and said, "Your Majesty."

Huangfu Yuchen comforted him by patting his back. "Everyone, be quiet. Palace maid Xing'er, We ask you, did Zhou Wenhuan really instruct you to disfigure Yan Changzai's face?"

Xing'er prostrated herself on the ground. "Yes, Your Majesty, he did."

Zhou Wenhuan exclaimed in panic, "Your Majesty, she's lying! I never instructed her to do such a thing!"

"We didn't ask you," Huangfu Yuchen said calmly, glancing at Deng Mande.

Deng Mande shouted, "Slap him."

With a "smack," Zhou Wenhuan was slapped by the young eunuch. He knelt on the ground, holding his face, and dared not speak, glaring at Xing'er with resentment, but refrained from speaking out.

Huangfu Yuchen looked at Xing'er and said, "I'm asking you, when and where did Zhou Wenhuan order you to do this? Tell me every word, every

detail.”

Xing’er replied, “It was yesterday when Yan Changzai sent someone to respond, saying that he would host a banquet for the Young Master. It was around the time of the evening curfew… Zhou Wenhuan called me to a secluded place and instructed me to intentionally break a wine jug during the banquet and use the porcelain shards to cut Yan Changzai’s face…”

“Remote place? Where?” Huangfu Yuchen asked again.

Yan Ge nodded discreetly. Huang Fuyuchen’s interrogation was meticulous, and any small detail could uncover the truth.

Xing’er’s eyes darted around. “I… this slave don’t remember. But it was indeed Young Master Zhou that instructed me.”

Zhou Wenhuan glared at her fiercely, his eyes burning with anger. If it weren’t for the chilling aura emanating from the emperor, he would have already pounced on Xing’er and given her a harsh lesson.

Huangfu Yuchen turned to Zhou Wenhuan and questioned him.

“You claim that you didn’t instruct Xing’er. Do you have any evidence?”

Zhou Wenhuan hurriedly defended himself, “Your Majesty, last night, when the evening curfew began, I had already retired to bed. I never spoke those words to her.”

“And where is the evidence?”

Zhou Wenhuan stammered, “Well…um.. there is no evidence from Xing’er either. Xing’er, Xiao Linzi, and I reside in Chunlu Pavilion. At that time, Xiao Linzi was in his room alone. But, Your Majesty, Xing’er claims it was done under my instruction, and she has no evidence! Your Majesty, Xing’er seems highly suspicious. Last night, when I was preparing to freshen up, I called her for a long time before she finally appeared. Your Majesty, I assure you It was not done by me. Setting aside the fact that I have never thought of harming Yan Changzai, even if I had such intentions, I would not

have done it in front of so many people. Your Majesty, please discern the truth!”

“Your Majesty, may I ask them a few questions?” Yan Ge asked Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded.

Yan Ge locked eyes with Xing’er. “Xing’er, look up.”

Xing’er slowly lifted her head, her eyes evading his gaze.

Yan Ge seemed not to have noticed. “Xing’er, you said Zhou Daying instructed you. Don’t you know that harming a palace consort is a capital offense?”

Xing’er whispered, “this slave am well aware, Your Highness.”

“Then why did you still do it?”

“Zhou Daying is my master, and if he orders, I dare not disobey.”

Yan Ge chuckled lightly. “So, you consider yourself a loyal servant?”

“Yes.”

Yan Ge turned to Zhou Wenhuan.

Finally, Zhou Wenhuan showed some intelligence. “Your Majesty, Yan Changzai, she’s lying! Zhou Daying has a bad temper and often gets angry with her and Xiao Linzi, how could she be so loyal to me? If Your Majesty and Yan Changzai don’t believe me, you can ask Xiao Linzi or the others in Chunfeng Palace.”

Xing’er became anxious and quickly changed her statement. “This slave lied. Master Zhou promised me rewards… This slave only agreed because of the rewards he offered.”

“Oh?” Yan Ge pressed on, step by step. “Did he give you gold, silver, or jewelry? Where did you keep them?”

Xing’er struggled to speak, unable to come up with an answer. Suddenly, she threw out a sentence and slammed her head onto the ground.

“It was Master Zhou who instructed this slave—”

Yan Ge was startled. “Stop her!”

The guards rushed forward, but they were a step too slow. Xing’er’s head hit the ground heavily, and blood spilled all over the floor.

Deng Mande quickly walked over to check her breath.

Yan Ge asked in a hoarse voice, “Is she still breathing?”

Deng Mande shook his head. “Reporting to Yan Changzai, she’s gone.”

Yan Ge felt a chill throughout his body. Although he had long known the brutality of the court, it was only when he witnessed a living being vanish before his eyes that he truly experienced it.

A warm kiss gently landed on his forehead as Huangfu Yuchen looked at him gently. “Don’t think too much; it’s not your fault.”

He held Yan Ge In his arms, then instructed Deng Mande, “Send Zhou Wenhuan to the cold palace.”

Zhou Wenhuan awakened from his fear and exclaimed, “Your Majesty! It truly wasn’t under my instruction! Xing’er, she’s feeling guilty, that’s why she—”

A clever eunuch quickly covered his mouth and dragged him away.

–“Ding. Side mission—send 1 love rival – Zhou Wenhuan to the cold palace, mission accomplished. Reward: 400 taels of silver and one silver chest. Would you like to open the silver chest now?”

Yan Ge selected “No”. He had received the reward, but he couldn’t feel any joy.

MCUS Chapter 53

Huangfu Yuchen had the hall tidied up and dismissed everyone. He reached out and gently pressed his hand on Yan Ge's head, smoothing his hair.

"Scared?" he asked.

Yan Ge snapped out of his thoughts, sat up, and let out a sigh. "It's the first time I've seen someone die right in front of me. I guess you could say I drove her to her death."

Huangfu Yuchen gently held his chin and looked into his eyes, speaking each word carefully. "This is the palace. Someone could die at any time. If it's not her, it could be you."

Yan Ge sighed softly. "I understand."

"Do you know when I first saw a dead person?" Huangfu Yuchen asked.

His use of "I" made Yan Ge smile lightly. "When was it?"

Huangfu Yuchen spoke softly, "When I was six. As the crown prince, the eldest son of the former emperor, I was born with that status. When I was six, a young eunuch, at the instructions of a concubine, tried to poison me. My mother discovered it and executed him right in front of me. At the time, I didn't understand so I thought my mother was cruel and terrifying."

"She did it to make you understand the dangers in the palace," Yan Ge said, feeling a slight improvement in his heavy mood. Perhaps that's how people are, they need to see someone worse off than themselves to realize they're still fortunate. He sympathized with Huangfu Yuchen. The heavens were fair in a way, giving you something meant losing something else. Huangfu Yuchen gained status but lost a lot—his childhood, freedom, happiness…

Huangfu Yuchen pulled him into his embrace and Yan Ge was taken aback.

Suddenly, Huangfu Yuchen lowered his head and kissed his lips, his tongue parting Yan Ge's teeth and entering his mouth, sucking and licking with passion and intensity. One hand protectively cradled Yan Ge's injured face.

Yan Ge was surprise and initially tried to push him away, but received a fervent response from Huangfu Yuchen. His body ignited like a flame, and a heat spread throughout, making his blood boil. His body was still tender, but his heart had long been mature. The once parched heart seemed to be soaked in sweet spring water, instantly revitalized. Against his own will, he quickly succumbed to the passion. Though he didn't respond to Huangfu Yuchen, he had already lost himself.

After a long time, Huangfu Yuchen released him and lightly caressed his face, his thumb gently grazing his now reddened lips.

"You…" Yan Ge panted.

"I remember our last kiss," Huangfu Yuchen interrupted him. "At that time, I couldn't control myself, but I didn't want to admit it, nor did I dare to."

Yan Ge just opened his eyes wide, and his mind was in a mess. The development of the matter was completely beyond his grasp.

Huangfu Yuchen held him tightly. "I need you to help me replenish the national treasury, that is a fact. The reason tells me as a ruler, I should not mix personal emotions in it, so I am unwilling to admit it. I am familiar with all the means of survival within the palace, but love is unfamiliar to me, difficult to control, so I didn't dare admit it. But today, I realized you might get hurt, or even die tomorrow. I want to seize this moment and not have regrets in the future."

"It's too sudden…" Yan Ge was too shocked to know what to say. Wasn't Huangfu Yuchen not interested in men? At first, he simply wanted to seek protection, and later, as he got to know Huangfu Yuchen better, his goal was to develop a brotherly relationship with him. But he never thought of

pursuing a romantic relationship with him. Even if he had to choose a partner in this era, an “emperor” would be the last option.

“Stay by my side.” Huangfu Yuchen had never seen him so flustered before, and couldn’t help chuckling, “I remember last time when I said that I was going to give a marriage to Yan Su, you who said there should be ‘mutual affection’ between the couple. Hasn’t your wish come true now?”

Mutual affection? Yan Ge was momentarily stunned before remembering. Could it be that Huangfu Yuchen had misunderstood all his thigh hugging actions n as falling in love with him? But could he explain that he hadn’t fallen in love with him? No, unless he didn’t want to level up. But he couldn’t accept Huangfu Yuchen’s feelings either.

Suddenly, the voice of the system rang out, “Ding. Side mission—Stay as a bed companion. If the mission is successful, you will be rewarded with 800 taels of silver and one silver chest. Accept the mission by selecting ‘Yes,’ refuse the mission by selecting ‘No’.”

Yan Ge’s mouth twitched, and without hesitation, he rejected the mission. “Little Jin, can’t you stop bothering me at such a time?”

–Yan Jin complained, “Master, I don’t intentionally spoil the mood. I can’t control the side missions…”

“What are you thinking about?” Huangfu Yuchen asked with a cheerful mood.

Yan Ge thought to himself, ‘Your Majesty, you’re celebrating too early.’

Yan Ge was sitting on pines and needles. Refusing was not an option, and agreeing was even more impossible. He was caught in a dilemma.

“What’s wrong?” Huangfu Yuchen sensed that something was amiss.

Yan Ge let out a sigh and took the initiative to embrace him. “I’m sorry, Yuchen. I can’t.”

A strange pain surged in Huangfu Yuchen's heart. The joy that had filled his chest suddenly dissipated, leaving him empty. He grabbed Yan Ge's arms tightly and asked, "Why?!"

Yan Ge looked directly into his eyes without hesitation. "You are excellent, and it's difficult for anyone to resist your charm. But I am just one of your many consorts. What I want is a mutual affection, a 'lifetime of only two people together.' Can you provide that? Instead of competing for favor with so many others in the future, I would rather protect you in a different way."

Huangfu Yuchen was stunned.

"I'm sorry." Yan Ge couldn't bear to see the disappointment in Huangfu Yuchen's eyes. He avoided his gaze, withdrew from his arms, and quickly left, as if fleeing from something.

Huangfu Yuchen's face grew dark, and he waved his hand, causing the teacups on the small table to fall and shatter on the ground.

Deng Mande cautiously entered the room. "Your Majesty?"

"What is it?" Huangfu Yuchen asked, looking in his direction.

Startled by the deep darkness in his eyes, Deng Mande became even more careful. "Your Majesty, Du Changzai is requesting an audience outside." He had seen Yan Changzai leave hastily earlier, his face devoid of any smile. What had happened between him and the Emperor? Deng Mande speculated in his mind but dared not show any clues on his face.

"Xuan." Huangfu Yuchen got up and walked to the golden throne.

Du Zhengfeng, dressed in palace attire, prostrated himself on the ground. "Your humble servant failed to stop Xing'er in time, resulting in Yan Changzai's injury. Please punish me, Your Majesty!"

The mention of "Yan Changzai" once again caused Huangfu Yuchen's calm emotions to fluctuate sharply. He calmed himself down and said, "I'll give you a chance to redeem yourself. Find out the truth behind Yan Changzai's

injury. Think carefully, who would benefit the most if Yan Changzai falls out of favor?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“You may leave.” Huangfu Yuche waved his hand impatiently.

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Deng Mande caught sight of the ointment on the soft couch. “Your Majesty, Yan Changzai…”

Huangfu Yuchen’s face turned cold. “Do not mention him in front of me again!” My heart has been discarded like this, must it be discarded a second time?

Deng Mande was stunned.

Yan Ge returned to the Luoxue Palace, where Wan Xiang, Xiao Chuanzi, and Qiuju hurriedly approached him.

“Greetings, Master.”

Yan Ge sighed. “That’s enough, you don’t need to be here.”

The three of them sensed his low spirits and didn’t dare to ask further questions. They left quietly, closing the door behind them.

Yan Ge thought about how Huangfu Yuchen must be feeling at this moment, and he felt a heavy burden in his heart. No one understood the feeling of unrequited love better than him. The sweetness and bitterness of desiring but not obtaining, of letting go but not forgetting.

With that in mind, he suddenly sat upright. How long had it been since he last thought of Wei Zhuo? Ever since he started his deal with Huangfu Yuchen, his life had been consumed by “business” and “Huangfu Yuchen.” The memories of that person had even started to fade from his mind. In fact, the memories between him and that person were indeed scarce. He had known that person for three years, while he had only known Huangfu

Yuchen for a few months, yet the memories between him and Huangfu Yuchen were more abundant, and his lips still seemed to retain the scorching heat…

–“Master, you’ve been sitting motionless for over half an hour.”

The childish voice brought Yan Ge back to reality. He lazily lay on the couch and said, “Little Jin, let’s chat.”

—“Okay. What does Master want to talk about?”

Yan Ge remained silent for a while. “Do you know what happened today?”

Yan Jin replied, “I know the basics.” As an extension of Yan Ge, it was essentially in sync with him. However, it was completely unaware of Xing’er’s attack, and thus, Yan Ge was caught off guard.

—“Master, are you troubled by the Emperor’s feelings for you?” Yan Jin asked. “Isn’t it good that the Emperor has fallen for you?” Yan Jin, being a system, didn’t fully grasp human emotions and he continued, “It would help you rank up faster.”

Yan Ge understood that it was just a system, with limited understanding of human emotions, so he didn’t blame it for its lack of coherence. “Never mind, let’s talk about leveling up.”

–Yan Jin kindly reminded him, “Master, do you think that by rejecting the Emperor, you can still expect to continue leveling up?”

“Are you saying that he would cancel our original agreement because I rejected him?” Yan Ge affirmed, “No, he is not the kind of person to seek revenge.”

–“Well, I hope so,” Yan Jin sighed with a tinge of sadness, “Why is it so difficult to rank up?”

Yan Ge remained silent, watching as the sun gradually descended in the sky.

“Knock, knock…”

“Master, they’ve sent ointment over there.”

Yan Ge hesitated for a moment and asked, “Who sent it?”

Wan Xiang replied, “Eunuch Deng.”

“Understood,” Yan Ge sighed.

“Master, will you be having dinner here or…”

“I won’t be going,” Yan Ge said.

In the dining hall of the Tenglong Palace, the table was filled with food, but one chair remained empty.

Huangfu Yuchen’s gaze swept across the entrance, his expression devoid of any emotion as he picked up the silver chopsticks.

‘With Yan Changzai absent, the emperor’s appetite has clearly diminished.’ Deng Mande let out a sigh, pacing in place, unsure of what to do next.

MCUS Chapter 54

The hazy morning cast a serene atmosphere within the palace.

Yan Ge walked up to the entrance of Luoxue Palace and saw Huangfu Yuchen, dressed in imperial robes, stepping out from the door. His upright figure appeared even more aloof than before, with the palace attendants following closely behind him, breathing carefully as they moved.

The two groups inevitably crossed paths at the palace gate.

Yan Ge approached and bowed, “Greetings to Your Majesty, may Your Majesty be blessed.”

“Rise,” came the curt reply, followed by a gentle breeze passing by Yan Ge. When he looked up, Huangfu Yuchen had already walked a considerable distance away.

Deng Mande followed closely, speaking in a hushed tone, “Your Majesty, you slept late last night. Would you like to rest for a moment on the dragon carriage?”

“No need.”

Inside the Tenglong Hall, the court officials had already assembled. Civil and military officials were dressed in respective red and black official robes, standing on either side of the grand hall, engaged in quiet conversations regarding state affairs or trivial matters.

“His Majesty has arrived—” With the eunuch’s chant, all the officials knelt down obediently. After Huangfu Yuchen took his seat on the dragon throne, they called out in unison, “Long live His Majesty, long live, long live—”

“Rise, my ministers.”

The officials sensed the Emperor’s lack of enthusiasm and reminded themselves to be cautious, and avoid any missteps. They replied, “Thank you, Your Majesty—”

Prince Huangfu Yuhu, dressed in a black prince’s robe, stood at the forefront of the civil officials, casting a puzzled and concerned look towards Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen didn’t notice, and he raised his hand to Deng Mande.

Deng Mande raised his voice and announced, “If there is no urgent matter, you may leave—”

Luo Wei, the Minister of the Ministry of War, stepped forward holding a document, “I have a matter to report, Your Majesty.”

“Speak,” Huangfu Yuchen said indifferently.

Luo Wei wore a delighted expression and proclaimed, “Your Majesty, I have good news and I congratulate you in advance. Since the implementation of the new iron smelting method, the Ministry of War has produced over thirty thousand pieces of new weaponry. The new iron is more durable than the old, which is cause for celebration!”

At the mention of the new iron, Huangfu Yuchen thought of Yan Ge and his heart ached. He cast a cold glance at Luo Wei and said, “Enough with the empty talk. Should the new iron prove unsatisfactory, would I have the Ministry of War use it to refine the old iron?”

A tense atmosphere filled the hall.

The other officials dared not make a sound, but secretly mocked Luo Wei for his failed attempt to change the Emperor’s mood. His intention to share good news had backfired.

Luo Wei’s face displayed fear, “I apologize, Your Majesty.”

“Is there anything else?” Huangfu Yuchen scanned the officials.

Yan Xiaojing stepped forward with a resolute expression, “Report to Your Majesty, in one month’s time, it will be the Longevity Festival. This is the first Longevity festival since Your Majesty’s ascension to the throne, and neighboring countries will surely send envoys to offer their congratulations. It is only fitting to hold grand celebrations, wishing Your Majesty an eternal reign. May I ask if Your Majesty has any special requests?”

Huangfu Yuchen remained silent for a long time.

Yan Xiaojing dared not raise his head to look at the Emperor’s expression, but he could feel Huangfu Yuchen’s gaze fixed on him and a shiver ran down his spine. Could it be that the unfilial son had caused some trouble in the harem?

Huangfu Yuchen spoke in a calm tone, “Keep everything simple, except for the necessary procedures.”

“Yes,” Yan Xiaojing, drenched in sweat, replied and returned to his position.

“Dismissed.” Huangfu Yuchen left with a brief command, leaving the hall.

“Dismissed—” Deng Mande called out, quickly following after him.

“Farewell, Your Majesty—”

After Huangfu Yuchen left, the officials stood up, exchanging glances. What could have happened to the Emperor today? Then they saw Prince Huangfu Yuhu leaving through a side door.

“Brother!”

Huangfu Yuchen walked slowly, and Huangfu Yuhu quickly caught up with him.

“Why didn’t you leave?” Huangfu Yuchen casually asked.

“I stayed to accompany you. Are you feeling unwell?” Huangfu Yuhu inquired, observing him closely.

“I slept late last night and didn’t sleep well, that’s all,” Huangfu Yuchen said. “Go back now, I want to be alone for a while.”

“Alright, I’ll go back,” Huangfu Yuhu knew that no matter how much he persuaded, the Emperor wouldn’t say anything. He had no choice but to leave and cast a glance at Deng Mande, signaling him to take good care of the Emperor.

Deng Mande bowed deeply.

Huangfu Yuchen commanded, “Drive away all the messy people in the Imperial Garden.”

Deng Mande’s face was almost filled with tears: Your Majesty, those are your consorts. When did they become messy people?

–“The scent of powder here is even stronger than the fragrance of flowers. What are they still doing here?”

A phrase he had inadvertently heard a long time ago flashed through Huangfu Yuchen’s mind. His expression grew even colder, and he randomly chose a narrow path and continued walking.

The people In the Imperial Garden were quickly dispersed, leaving only butterflies and bees dancing around the flowers, creating the only movement and sound.

Deng Mande was afraid of causing any disturbance that might displease Huangfu Yuchen, so he tiptoed behind him. The other palace attendants stayed even farther away.

Huangfu Yuchen exuded a sense of loneliness stronger than before he knew Yan Ge, which made him sigh deeply in his heart. “Your Majesty, why not go and sit with Consort Rou? This slave remembers that Your Majesty used to enjoy listening to Consort Rou play the piano.”

Huangfu Yuchen walked absentmindedly. “Deng Mande, in history, has there ever been an emperor who favored only one person?”

Deng Mande carefully thought and replied, “Replying to Your Majesty, there seems to have been one. That was in a previous dynasty. Emperor Fang of the Fang Dynasty was very fond of a consort. When Emperor Fang first met her, he was smitten and elevated her rank several times, eventually making her the Imperial Noble Consort. He even bestowed her the title ‘Xin,’ indicating that she was the treasure of his heart. However, Imperial Noble Consort Xin passed away less than a month after being elevated to that position. Historical records state that she died from an epidemic, but legends say that Imperial Noble Consort Heart died from…”

Deng Mande didn’t dare to continue.

Huangfu Yuchen calmly took over, “It was due to the scheming of the Empress at that time.”

Deng Mande was taken aback. Why was the Emperor asking yet he knew?

When they reached the shore of the tranquil lake, Huangfu Yuchen stopped and his expression grew colder.

Deng Mande followed his gaze. Song Ruhao was standing by the lake, holding a bamboo rod in his hand and stirring something in the water. Palace maid Yunsi and eunuch Xiao Nianzi were anxiously trying to dissuade him.

Deng Mande was shocked. Didn’t he order the people below to send everyone in the Imperial Garden away? Even Consort Li had been asked to leave. Why was Song Guiren still here?

Huangfu Yuchen’s displeasure was evident. Deng Mande quickly walked over and said, “Song Guiren, didn’t we already ask for you to temporarily retreat? Why are you still here?”

As a servant, he represented the Emperor at this moment. Although Song Ruhao was a consort and the son of the Grand Tutor, he didn’t need to

consider him.

The palace maids and eunuchs kneeled upon seeing Huangfu Yuchen in his bright yellow imperial robe.

Only then did Song Ruhao notice Huangfu Yuchen and his expression turned startled. He hurriedly tried to approach, but stumbled and fell into the lake amidst the gasps of the palace attendants.

“Young Master!”

Deng Mande was greatly alarmed. “Quick, save him!”

Fortunately, Song Ruhao held onto the bamboo rod, and the eunuchs grabbed the rod to pull him up.

Song Ruhao was drenched from head to toe, his thin robe soaked through and almost transparent. With an embarrassed expression, he lowered his head and quickly walked to Huangfu Yuchen, bowing deeply. “Your Majesty, your humble servant pays respects to you. May you be blessed and prosperous. Your humble servant was reading ‘Amusing Tales of Huangfu’s First Dynasty’ here earlier, and a gust of wind blew the book into the lake. Your humble servant cherished the book and couldn’t bear to part with it, so I stayed behind. Please forgive your humble servant, Your Majesty.”

“’Amusing Tales of Huangfu’s First Dynasty’?” Huangfu Yuchen found it somewhat familiar.

Song Ruhao smiled faintly, lost in memories. “This book was bestowed upon me by Your Majesty a long time ago, and I… your humble servant has treasured it.”

Huangfu Yuchen remained silent, glancing at Deng Mande.

Deng Mande quickly signaled for the palace attendants carrying the imperial sedan to approach.

A flicker of joy crossed Song Ruhao’s face.

Huangfu Yuchen got on the sedan. “Return to the Tenglong Palace.”

Deng Mande was momentarily stunned but quickly reacted. “Yes! Your Majesty, let us proceed—”

Song Ruhao remained kneeling in place, staring in the direction the sedan was heading, his face pale as snow.

“Young Master, be careful not to catch a chill. Please forgive this servant.” Xiao Nianzi knelt closer, draping an outer robe over Song Ruhao.

Yan Ge, who had already left the palace, was in a bad mood.

Bai Jushen looked at his face in surprise. “Boss, what happened to your face?”

“I stumbled and fell by accident.” Yan Ge remained expressionless.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun fell into silence. When they saw the wound on Yan Ge’s face, they also asked and received the same answer. But both of them knew it couldn’t be that simple.

Bai Jushen refrained from asking further and said, “I have visited most of the jewelry stores in the capital. I will continue today. If Boss has no other instructions, I will go out now.”

Yan Ge nodded and sat in his office. Although there were many things to attend to, he felt idle. He had the Xiao Chuanzi call Lu Yaozu. Wan Xiang continued her work at the tailoring workshop.

“Boss,” Lu Yaozu called out.

Yan Ge: “How much income has the company received recently?”

Lu Yaozu opened the account book in his hand, “There are more than 100,000 taels in total. Among them-“

Yan Ge wasn’t in the mood to hear the details. He waved his hand dismissively. “Forget it, you may leave.”

The office was now empty, with only Yan Ge remaining.

Yan Ge opened the silver box in his backpack, finding another rare material. He threw it back into the backpack with interest.

–Yan Jin remarked, “Master, you seem to be in a bad mood today. You still care about the Emperor, after all.”

Yan Ge sighed and walked slowly to the window, surveying the scenery in the courtyard. Under the scorching sun, the green leaves and red flowers wilted, presenting an unappealing sight.

“After all, he is the only… friend I can connect with in the palace. Now I truly feel a sense of isolation and estrangement.”

After wasting a day at the company, he returned to the palace at the hour of You. Entering the Tenglong Palace, he stood outside the dining hall for a while, only allowing someone to deliver the gift he bought for Huangfu Yuchen, but in the end, he didn’t go in.

MCUS Chapter 55

For over half month, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen did not exchange a single word. Occasionally, they would encounter each other at the entrance in the morning. Yan Ge would greet him, and Huangfu Yuchen would respond with a faint “Mm” or simply walk past without uttering a word, not even sparing a glance at Yan Ge.

The cut on Yan Ge’s face had already healed, leaving behind a scar. Although it was faint, it remained quite noticeable because it was on his face. Walking on the streets, the gazes that fell upon him were no longer filled with admiration and envy, but with sympathy, and even disgust.

Madam Yan was filled with distress, searching for several remedies for him, but none proved effective. Yan Xiaojing had been worrying about Yan Ge being banished to the cold palace due to his injury, and after half a month, even he couldn’t remain calm anymore. The Emperor’s thoughts were difficult to fathom, so he chose not to ponder on them. Instead, he focused on being more diligent in his duties, fearing that any negligence on his part would implicate Yan Ge.

“Young Master, today is your 18th birthday. Why not take a day off, invite His Majesty to dine together, or go to the Yan Mansion, or simply go for a leisurely outing?” Wan Xiang suggested, hoping to alleviate Yan Ge’s recent low mood.

“Let’s discuss it later.” Yan Ge folded up the just-completed jewelry design and put it away. He didn’t misjudge Bai Jushen. Bai Jushen indeed possessed true talents and efficiency. Following his instructions, the other party had inspected all the jewelry stores in the capital and advised Yan Ge to acquire one that was on the brink of closing down. The preparations for its opening were now proceeding rapidly.

The reason for choosing a store that was on the verge of closing was that such establishments were relatively cheaper. Since Yan Ge had confidence in reviving it, it was better to buy a struggling business rather than one that was already thriving.

Currently, some of the jewelry designs by Yan Ge were already in production. The noble ladies and young misses of the capital had been eagerly anticipating the acquisition of the jewelry store by the First Company. The exquisite garments from the tailoring workshop had already captivated them, and they believed that the jewelry store of the First Company would not disappoint. The First Company had gained considerable attention without the need for deliberate publicity and in five days, the store would open its doors.

“Prepare to leave the palace.”

Inspiration had struck today, causing delay in leaving the palace until this late hour when the sun was already high in the sky. To avoid drawing attention to his departure, Yan Ge still wore his court attire and would change once he got on the carriage.

As he exited the palace gates, Gao Feng and Gao Yun briskly approached, bowing in unison.

“Greetings, Yan Changzai.”

“Let’s go.”

While passing through the Imperial Garden, they met Tian Guiren, who was dressed in a purple gown. She deliberately glanced at Yan Ge’s face and couldn’t help but laugh, covering her mouth with a tinge of embarrassment.

“Yan Changzai, I have been impolite.”

Yan Ge smiled faintly, “Tian Guiren exaggerates. Why didn’t Tian Guiren accompany His Majesty today? Oh, my apologies, I forgot. His Majesty has been busy recently, either spending time with the Empress or the four consorts, even when he has any free time.”

“You!” Tian Guiren raised her hand in anger.

Gao Feng raised his arm, and unsheathed his sword.

Tian Guiren was startled, cursing herself for being foolish. Gao Feng and Gao Yun were imperial guards and were still protecting Yan Changzai, indicated that the Emperor hadn’t truly abandoned hun. By causing trouble for Yan Changzai now, wouldn’t she be seeking her own demise? He was already disfigured anyway, why should she care about him. Thinking this, she huffed lightly and left.

Song Ruhao, accompanied by the close palace maidens and guards, calmly approached Yan Ge, his smile icy.

“Greetings, Song Guiren.”

Song Ruhao glanced at the scar on Yan Ge’s face, saying, “No need for formalities. Yan Changzai, forgive me for being straightforward. I’m just curious—why does Yan Changzai seem completely unconcerned about the scar on his face? You still reside in Tenglong Palace, aren’t you afraid of offending His Majesty’s eyes?”

For the first time, a hint of hostility appeared in his eyes, which Yan Ge found amusing. When he still had his looks, Song Ruhao concealed his true thoughts quite well. But now that he was disfigured, Song Ruhao seemed to become more guarded against him.

Casually sitting on a chair by the flower bed, Yan Ge smiled and asked Song Ruhao, “I wonder if Song Guiren is interested in hearing a story from Yan Changzai?”

Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuangzi had been with Yan Ge for a long time, and their courage had grown. They stood behind Yan Ge with their heads held high, fanning him, showing no fear in front of Song Ruhai.

Song Ru Hao glanced at the dirty stone fence and couldn’t suppress the jealousy in his heart. Why did Yan Ge make such a vulgar gesture look so elegant when he did it?

“Yan Changzai, please speak.”

Yan Ge waves the golden fan Huangfu Yuchen had given him and spoke leisurely, “There was a person named Su Dongpo who had a good friend, a Buddhist monk known as Fo Yin. They were close, and one day, Su Dongpo went to visit Fo Yin, and they meditated together. After the meditation, Su Dongpo asked, ‘How did I look while meditating?’ Fo Yin replied, ‘You looked like a Buddha.’ Su Dongpo burst into laughter and said, ‘To me, you looked like a pile of excrement!’ Fo Yin simply smiled. Su Dongpo laughed heartily and left. When he arrived home, he happened to meet his younger sister, and he told her about the incident, thinking she would find it amusing. However, his younger sister said, ‘In Buddhist teachings, all appearances are reflections of one’s own mind.’ Fo Yin saw you with the mind of a Buddha, so he said you looked like a Buddha. But when you called Fo Yin a pile of excrement, it reveals something about your own mind.’”

After finishing the story, Yan Ge bowed to Song Ruhao and calmly walked away.

Song Ruhao stood in place for a long time without moving.

Yan Ge got into the carriage, and Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi were still a little dazed.

“What’s wrong?”

Xiao Chuangzi said in admiration, “Master, I just felt that the story you told was profound, like… that of a master!”

Yan Ge laughed.

After leaving the palace, the carriage went straight to Yan Mansion. On a son’s birthday and a mother’s day of suffering, it was only right for Yan Ge to show filial piety before his mother.

Madam Yan saw the scar on Yan Ge’s face and sighed for the hundredth time in her heart. Seeing him still wearing a smiling face, she felt both

distressed and relieved.

At the dinner table, Yan Su reminded Yan Ge, “The Ten Thousand Longevity Festival is coming soon. Don’t forget to prepare a gift for the Emperor.” His thought was that if Yan Ge made a mistake, his days in the palace would become difficult.

Huangfu Yuchen’s birthday was approaching? Yan Ge pondered whether the Ten Thousand Longevity Festival could be an opportunity to improve his relationship with Huangfu Yuchen.

Yan Xiaojing looked at Yan Ge with concern and asked, “You haven’t been in high spirits lately. Has something happened?” The previous Yan Ge used to be full of energy and enthusiasm when he smiled, but now, although he still smiled, it was not as joyful as before.

“Nothing,” Yan Ge replied, “I’ve just been busy. Mother, let me toast to you.”

After the family of four raised their glasses and finished toasting, Madam Yan said, “About a month after the Ten Thousand Longevity Festival, on the eighteenth of the seventh month, your eldest brother is getting married. You’ll have to find time to attend. I’m telling you in advance.”

Yan Ge looked at Yan Su in surprise.

“So sudden?”

“What’s so sudden?” Madam Yan shrugged, “Your Eldest brother is not young anymore. It’s time for him to get married.”

Yan Ge gossiped with Yan Su, “Is it the person you were talking to the other day?”

Yan Su nodded, his face showing rare embarrassment.

Yan Ge sighed inwardly. The Hundred Flowers Festival truly lived up to its reputation as the ancient matchmaking version.

“Don’t worry, Mother. I’m sure elder brother will get married…” Yan Ge laughed awkwardly, feeling guilty. The situation between him and Huangfu Yuchen was so tense now that he wasn’t sure if Huangfu Yuchen would let him leave the palace now that he was displeased.

In the evening, when he returned to Luoxue Pavilion, there was a clear silhouette of a man reflected on the window. He was holding a wine or tea cup and taking a sip.

Yan Ge asked Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi to leave and entered alone.

Huangfu Yuchen was sitting on the couch, sipping lightly. There were seven or eight dishes on the square table, along with a red silk box. He looked thinner, and his thinner face made his aura even colder and more refined.

By taking the initiative, it meant Huangfu Yuchen had given up his pride. Yan Ge walked over, feeling moved, “Yu Chen.”

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at him and said softly, “If I hadn’t come, I’m afraid you would never take the initiative to appear in front of me again.” As he spoke, a fragrance of wine emanated from his mouth.

Yan Ge picked up the white porcelain wine pot and weighed it in his hand. It was almost empty. He glanced at the nearby area and saw another empty wine pot on the couch. “How much have you been drinking?”

“Just a few cups, not enough to get drunk.” Huangfu Yuchen put down his wine cup, stretched out his arm, and pulled Yan Ge into his embrace, his legs clamping around his waist as he stared straight into his eyes.

When Yan Ge moved, Huangfu Yuchen held him tighter.

Yan Ge saw that Huangfu Yuchen had no other intentions, so he went along with it. However, sitting in that half-sitting position was quite embarrassing. He reached out and poured a cup of tea for Huangfu Yu Chen, waiting for him to continue speaking. From the bottom of his heart, he also hoped to break the deadlock between him and Huangfu Yuchen. He didn’t want to

give up on his promotion, but he also didn’t want to truly become Huangfu Yuchen’s “consort.” Perhaps Huangfu Yuchen could give him a way out.

Huangfu Yuchen didn’t detect any awkwardness on Yan Ge’s face and didn’t know whether to feel happy or disappointed. “I thought I could avoid seeing you, but it’s difficult. It’s like being poisoned, and you are the antidote. Yan Ge, stay by my side. I will make our feelings mutual, just as you said, ‘a lifetime with one person.’ When the time is right, I will dismiss all the consorts I haven’t had children with. As for those who have given birth, I will never touch them again.”

Yan Ge stared at him in a daze. Was he serious?

Huangfu Yuchen held him tightly, his breath wafting onto his face, his sharp eyes fixed on him like a hunter aiming at its prey. “Yan Ge, I will never let you leave the palace in this lifetime. Why don’t we sincerely stay together?”

Yan Ge felt a slight looseness in his heart. There was no denying that Huangfu Yuchen was quite charming: his facial features were exquisite and pleasing to the eye, and his power was unrivaled, capable of helping him expand his business and provide protection. He was the epitome of the ancient “tall, rich, and handsome” archetype. Now that he regarded Yan Xiaojing, Madam Yan, and Yan Su as his true family, it meant that Yan Ge would inevitably be unable to leave the palace through “unlawful” means. If he chose to be with Huangfu Yuchen, not only could he resolve the issue of his promotion, but he would also gain a trusted companion, a true win-win situation. However, with Huangfu Yuchen’s three thousand beauties in the harem, could he really be content with just one lover?

“Stay by my side, a lifetime with just the two of us.” Huangfu Yuchen lightly kissed his forehead. “I won’t restrict you. If you wish to continue your business ventures, you may do so. I won’t force you and will give you time to consider.”

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Yan Ge pointed at his own face, “You don’t mind the scar on my face?” Throughout the conversation, he didn’t detect any disdain in Huangfu Yu Chen’s eyes.

Huangfu Yu Chen chuckled, “Am I such a shallow person? Once you become accustomed to it, the scar seems as if it has always been there from the beginning. If it wasn’t the fact that my appearance as the ruler would be affected, I wouldn’t mind leaving a mark on my face to soothe your heart.”

Yan Ge was taken aback. He did mind the scar on his face to some extent. Although men didn’t usually care much about their looks, nobody liked having an ugly scar on their face.

His calm demeanor had a reason behind it. Yan Jin(system) had informed him that the reason the scar couldn’t be completely removed was because the muscles had been damaged. Ordinary medications had poor regenerative capabilities, but with the Foundation Pill, all impurities in the body could be eliminated, providing an instant cure. Moreover, there were many scar-removal remedies in the Pharmacopoeia, although they were slower in effectiveness compared to the Foundation Pill. Therefore, he had been waiting for his next promotion so as to obtain the Foundation Pill. However, Huangfu Yuchen’s calmness about it also pleased him and a faint smile appeared on his face involuntarily.

Huangfu Yuchen let out a sigh, gripping his hand. “Does this count as my request being fulfilled?”

Yan Ge stared into his eyes. “Surrounded by numerous beauties, can you truly remain faithful?”

Huangfu Yuchen looked at him with a smile. “If I were to truly do wrong, I believe you would come up with hundreds of ways to seek revenge. Are you afraid you can’t bind my heart? The Yan Ge I know is spirited and determined in the face of any challenge.”

Yan Ge placed a hand on his shoulder. “As you said, love is poison. Once consumed, only one person can provide the antidote. I can think of hundreds of ways to retaliate against you, but none of them can cure the poison. Shouldn’t I be cautious?”

“Have more faith in me.” Huangfu Yuchen was helpless, and could only utter these feeble words. It was a fact that he had many consorts, and given his status as emperor, it was difficult to assure Yan Ge. In this regard, he truly owed Yan Ge.

“I will give you time to consider, but I hope it won’t be too long, and I hope your answer won’t disappoint me.”

Yan Ge glanced at him speechlessly. Since he was only given one path, what difference did it make whether he considered it or not?

Huangfu Yuchen understood his meaning and caressed his face, unwilling to let go.

Both of them fell into silence, pondering their own thoughts. Despite the absence of words, the atmosphere was awkward.

Huangfu Yuchen held Yan Ge’s arm tighter, feeling that Yan Ge intended to give him an answer today. He didn’t want to hear a rejection. Since their initial encounter, he had recognized Yan Ge as someone with strong principles, like a gentle breeze, freely able to withdraw at any moment, beyond the grasp of ordinary people. If Yan Ge’s answer was negative, he didn’t know what he would do. He didn’t want to reach that point with Yan Ge. Love was indeed poison, and whoever touched it would be sealed by its enchantment.

After a long while, Yan Ge raised his hand and smiled at him. “Okay, I promise you. I also want to give myself a chance.” His life would be long,

so why should he hesitate? Since he could earn twenty thousand taels by investing ten thousand taels, he could also turn Huangfu Yuchen from a lecherous man into a loyal dog!

—“Master, you’ve made a wise decision!” Yan Jin excitedly chimed in.

Yan Ge ignored him.

Huangfu Yuchen’s dark eyes suddenly brightened, and he lifted Yan Ge onto his lap, holding the back of his head, and kissed him deeply. Yan Ge could clearly feel Huangfu Yuchen’s rapid heartbeat and elevated body temperature.

Huangfu Yu Chen suddenly released him, hesitating. “Have you really considered it thoroughly? Being together will undoubtedly bring us great pressure. The struggles within the harem will intensify, and your situation will become more perilous…” Despite his words, his arms still held Yan Ge tightly.

Yan Ge sensed his conflicting emotions and felt moved. Huangfu Yuchen had truly fallen in love with him, which was why reason and emotions were entangled. This man’s past was despicable, but his emotions were so pure.

“I’m not that weak.”

Huangfu Yuchen kissed him again.

Yan Ge embraced his waist, responding hesitantly.

After a while, Huangfu Yuchen released him, panting slightly. “Let’s abandon our agreement. As long as there is a suitable opportunity, I will promote you. You shouldn’t have to wait until you earn 200,000 taels.”

“No, no,” Yan Ge shook his head repeatedly. “Agreements are agreements, and emotions are emotions. Besides, I enjoy challenging myself. Or do you not believe that I can do it?”

Huangfu Yuchen could only give in. “Fine, I’ll listen to you. I’ll stay here tonight.”

–“Ding—Side task: Serve the Emperor in bed. If the task is completed, you will be rewarded with…”

If it weren’t for this annoying system without a pause button, and the need to wait for the prompt to finish before making a selection, Yan Ge would have definitely turned off the sound.

He jumped off Huangfu Yuchen’s lap and deliberately looked at him with a horrified expression. “Isn’t that too fast?”

Huangfu Yuchen paused for a moment, then chuckled and teased, “Where did you get that idea? I just want to sleep, nothing more.”

Yan Ge didn’t refuse. A relationship requires both parties to put in effort and nurture it together in order to last. Since he had already agreed to be with Huangfu Yuchen, he would also strive for it.

Huangfu Yuchen pulled him back to his side. “Zhou Wenhan has been banished to the cold palace, and Du Zhengfeng will keep an eye on Song Ruhao. So you don’t need to worry.”

Yan Ge looked at him in surprise. “Du Changzai? Is he your person?”

Huangfu Yu Chen nodded. “He is actually a secret guard, and doesn’t have a flower body. In order to monitor the male consorts and maintain purity in the harem, I intentionally arranged for him to be a consort.”

Yan Ge raised an eyebrow and casually said, “I suppose there might be someone arranged by you among the female consorts as well?”

Huangfu Yuchen admitted, “It’s Consort Rou. She is also a secret guard who accepted this mission. She will spend her entire life in the harem, so I got a child for her when she came.”

Yan Ge held his hand. “You don’t have to tell me everything. I will learn to trust you.”

Huangfu Yuchen gazed at him and kissed his face. “Alright. From now on, I won’t hide things from you that are unrelated to state affairs, such as

birthday gifts.” He handed a gift box to Yan Ge.

Yan Ge opened it and found a beautifully carved jade pendant inside, although it didn’t appear to be made of actual jade. He picked it up and examined it. “What is this?”

Huangfu Yuchen explained, “You often venture outside the palace and can’t avoid some dangers. With your abilities, there shouldn’t be many people who can threaten you, but it’s better to be cautious. This is a fragrance free pendant from a rare fish species. Just a drop of water can release a scent that humans can’t smell but can be detected by falcons. If you encounter any danger, just moisten it. No matter where you are, I can find you.”

Yan Ge put it away. “Thank you. I’ll keep it with me.”

“I’ll inform Gao Feng and Gao Yun tomorrow. From now on, they’ll follow you in your tasks,” Huangfu Yuchen added.

Yan Ge smiled happily. “That’s great. I was afraid they wouldn’t agree.” Among the four social classes, merchants, though wealthy, had the lowest status.

Huangfu Yuchen smiled. “That’s easy. But they will still retain the title of Imperial Guards.”

Both of them understood the implication — Gao Feng and Gao Yun would not have to report Yan Ge’s words and deeds outside the palace every day. It goes without saying that their relationship will now change. In the past, Huangfu Yuchen didn’t talk about it explicitly to avoid hurting Yan Ge’s feelings.

After saying what needed to be said and explaining what needed to be explained, Yan Ge called for the maids to come in and clean up the table.

Huangfu Yuchen summoned Deng Mande, who was swatting mosquitoes in a corner. After taking a bath at Tenglong Palace, he returned to Luoxue Palace. Yan Ge had already freshened up and was lying on the bed in a

white inner robe, leaving one side of the bed empty. There was an ice basin placed beside the bedposts.

Huangfu Yu Chen smirked, walked over, and lowered the gauze curtain before lying down on the bed.

Yan Ge put away the pharmacopoeia.

Two lanterns remained lit, their light filtered through the gauze curtain, creating a hazy atmosphere.

Huangfu Yuchen covered Yan Ge's body with his own and kissed his lips. Yan Ge didn't refuse; Huangfu Yu Chen's kiss brought him pleasure and contentment.

The next morning, Xiao Chuanzi held the toiletries, and Deng Mande held the imperial robe, waiting at the door, their faces filled with relief. The two masters had reconciled, which meant less suffering for them as servants.

Huangfu Yuchen opened his eyes and saw Yan Ge lying next to him. For a moment, he still found it unbelievable that Yan Ge had truly agreed to be with him. As an emperor, he had never dared to hope for love, but now he had obtained it, and his heart overflowed with emotion and satisfaction.

He stared at Yan Ge until Deng Mande quietly called from outside, prompting him to sit up.

Yan Ge opened his eyes, smiled at Huangfu Yuchen, and leaned in to kiss him on the lips, amused by his surprised expression. "What's wrong? Now you belong to me. I can kiss you whenever I want and repay you in kind. Is that not allowed?"

Huangfu Yuchen smiled, wrapping his arm around Yan Ge's waist. "Allowed? Why wouldn't it be?"

Yan Ge felt a sense of joy flooding his heart. When he had secretly loved Wen Zhi(crush in previous life), his overflowing affection had been trapped within his chest, tormenting him day and night. But now, there was

someone who allowed him to freely express his emotions and accepted his gestures with pleasure, making him feel truly happy.

After allowing Xiao Chuanzi and Deng Mande to enter and set things down, the two dismissed them and prepared themselves before leaving together.

Just before opening the door, Yan Ge grabbed Huangfu Yuchen and swiftly planted a kiss on his lips, then lifted his lips in a smile.

Just before opening the door, Yan Ge held onto Huangfu Yuchen and swiftly pressed a kiss upon his lips, a smile playing on his lips.

“I will accompany you for dinner,” Yan Ge said. The first step in training a scumbag is to make him accustomed to your presence.

“Mmm, I’ll wait for you,” Huangfu Yuchen replied.

The two walked forward side by side. Their smiling faces caught the attention of Gao Feng and Gao Yun, who keenly sensed a different atmosphere than before.

“Gao Feng, Gao Yun, from now on, you will follow Yan Changzai in his tasks. Are you willing? I will retain your titles as imperial guards,” Huangfu Yuchen declared.

Working outside the palace offered more freedom than within its confines, something Gao Feng and Gao Yun desired. They exchanged glances, both showing delight. “We are willing to follow Yan Changzai. Thank you for your grace, Your Majesty!”

Yan Ge playfully interjected, “Rest assured, I won’t mistreat you. Let’s go.”

He and Huangfu Yuchen exchanged a knowing look, and then they set off towards their respective destinations.

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As the carriage arrived at the company's doorstep, Yan Ge hadn't yet alighted when a cheerful voice reached his ears from outside.

"Young Master Qin, please wait for us!"

Yan Ge stepped off the carriage, curious. "Ah, so it's Young Master Zhang, Young Master Ye, and Young Master Kang. Why didn't the three of you come inside? It seems I'll need to have a talk with the reception desk. My apologies for the oversight, please understand."

Zhang Mo laughed heartily. "Brother Qin, you're being too serious. It's our impatience that led us to intercept you here."

"Oh? Let's discuss it inside," Yan Ge replied.

"I don't know if Young Master Qin is available? How about a visit to the Fragrant Teahouse?" Ye Feiyang extended an invitation.

"Of course. Please lead the way," Yan Ge said.

The Fragrant Teahouse was one of the finest teahouses in the capital. Its tea had an exquisite aroma, and it was here that the former Emperor had once enjoyed a cup of tea, praising it endlessly and even bestowing a plaque himself. That's why the Fragrant Teahouse was famous. Yan Ge pondered, considering that when the time was right, he would have Huangfu Yuchen bestow a few words upon his company as well.

Sitting in the serene teahouse, Zhang Mo personally poured a cup of tea for Yan Ge. Yan Ge contemplated why these three individuals had sought him out.

After some small talk, Zhang Mo began, “Today, it’s a rare occasion for us to come without any pressing matters. Please forgive our audacity, Brother Qin.”

“Brother Zhang, you’re being too modest,” Yan Ge smiled. “We are all straightforward individuals. Brother Zhang, feel free to speak your mind.”

Zhang Mo got straight to the point. “The Yiyi Tailoring Workshop has grown to great heights, and I believe that a single workshop alone cannot meet the demand for orders. Both Zhang’s Elegant Tailoring Workshop and Ye’s Capital Fashion Workshop are interested in collaborating with the First Company to alleviate the pressure on Yiyi Tailoring Workshop.”

Ye Ziyang added, “Both of our workshops have a decent scale, and our tailors are skilled. We are confident that we can produce garments of the same exquisite quality as Yiyi Tailoring Workshop. We just wondered if Brother Qin would be willing to give us a chance?”

Though the two appeared confident, they were actually quite nervous. Despite only having a few interactions with Yan Ge, they had already recognized his shrewd nature. If he had decided against collaborating with them, no matter how much they tried to persuade him, it would be in vain.

Yan Ge pondered for a moment before nodding. “That can be arranged. However, the two gentlemen will need to provide me with a proposal for me to review. The proposal should include details about the scale of your workshops, daily production capacity, quality inspection methods, and the number of tailors, among other factors. After I analyze it and find no issues, we can discuss the specifics of our collaboration. How does that sound?”

The good news came too easily, and Zhang Mo and Ye Ziyang exchanged surprised glances.

Ye Ziyang asked, “No problem with the proposal. What do you mean by ‘quality inspection methods’?”

Yan Ge took a sip of tea and explained, “It refers to inspecting the quality of the garments before delivery. If they don’t meet the standards, they must be

returned. Yiyi Tailoring Workshop produces exquisite pieces, maintaining quality rather than quantity. We can't let a single speck of dirt spoil the whole pot."

Ye Ziyang and Zhang Mo nodded in agreement.

"Young Master Qin, you speak wisely. We will quickly prepare the proposal for your review," Zhang Mo said.

Yan Ge turned to Kang Jian and asked, "And what brings you, Young Master Kang?"

Kang Jian smiled. "I came along with these two. By the way, Young Master Qin, is there really no way to remove the scar on your face?"

Zhang Mo cast a reproachful glance at Kang Jian for mentioning the scar. However, Zhang Mo was certain that Yan Ge wouldn't be angered by it. Yan Ge's demeanor after the injury was no different from before, so he was clearly unaffected by the scar on his face.

Yan Ge smiled gently. "Indeed, there isn't."

Ye Ziyang glanced at Kang Jian, a trace of disdain flickering in his eyes that the other party didn't notice. He cheerfully said, "I heard that Young Master Kang has a sister, gentle and charming, still awaiting her marriage. Could it be that Young Master Kang intends to play matchmaker for her and Young Master Qin?"

Kang Jian's expression revealed a hint of annoyance as he retorted, "Young Young Master Ye, are you a mind reader? How can you be so certain?"

Yan Ge intervened to defuse the situation. "Let's not joke around, gentlemen. I should have mentioned earlier that I already have… a husband." He didn't want to address Huangfu Yuchen as his husband, but in this era, it was not uncommon for men to have multiple wives and concubines. If he didn't indicate his status as a married man, he feared that certain individuals would go out of their way to matchmake him with

women. It was better to clarify things early on and avoid unnecessary trouble.

The realization dawned on Zhang Mo and the others. So Yan Ge was a married man. If someone as remarkable as Yan Ge had managed to “marry” someone, then that person’s identity must be extraordinary as well. They made a mental note not to invite Yan Ge to any places of temptation in the future to avoid any potential complications.

Yan Ge felt relieved that he was “married”. In this world, at least he didn’t have to endure judgmental gazes from others.

Zhang Mo poured him a cup of tea and changed the subject. “In a few days, it will be the grand opening of the First Company’s jewelry store. We would like to extend our early wishes for your prosperous business and abundant wealth, Young Master Qin!”

“Thank you.”

———

When Linlang Pavilion opened, they only set off a few firecrackers during the unveiling to ward off evil spirits and attract good fortune. Although the commotion was small, there were still many people who came. Ladies and their entourages, including maids and servants, arrived in a continuous stream. Every woman who entered Linlang Pavilion received a bouquet of freshly picked and carefully wrapped flowers from the handsome shopkeepers. Their faces blushed with shyness, and even before entering the store, they had already developed a favorable impression of the shop.

The first floor showcased jewelry with prices ranging from two to ten taels. Even families with average means had to spend money to provide their daughters with presentable dowries to prevent them from being looked down upon in their new households. And for those with sons getting married, they had to be willing to spend on betrothal gifts. This was a sizable group. Although the jewelry on the first floor was relatively inexpensive, the craftsmanship was exquisite without any negligence.

Earrings, silver hairpins, and rings, all of them were exquisitely made. The girls gathered around the counters, their eyes sparkling with delight.

Madam Yan, accompanied by two maids and two young male attendants, also blended into the crowd. She surveyed the lobby on the first floor, her face filled with satisfaction and pride. Due to Yan Ge's special status, she only exchanged a distant glance with him without approaching to speak with him. Yan Ge discreetly instructed the two clever shop assistants to attend to her well.

"Young Master Qin, congratulations, congratulations!" Zhang Mo and Ye Ziyang appeared with gifts. They were accompanied by another unfamiliar man.

"Brother Zhang, Young Master Ye, thank you for coming." Yan Ge took out two silver cards from his sleeve. "These are VIP cards for Linlang Pavilion. With these cards, you will receive a discount at the pavilion."

Zhang Mo and Ye Ziyang looked at the cards, which bore the emblem of the First Company. Apart from that, there were some strange symbols, which were actually Arabic numerals. Currently, only Yan Ge and his trusted associates could understand them.

Yan Ge explained, "Different symbols represent different individuals, and even if someone finds this card, they won't be able to impersonate.

Yan Ge sternly said, "This one is more suitable to be given to a lady, a beloved one or a younger sister."

Zhang Mo had the shop assistant bring it out for him to see. "It's precisely for my younger sister. She will definitely like it. Wrap it up."

"Is this a ring?" Ye Ziyang pointed at a pair of rings and asked.

"Young Master Qin, your remarkable and ingenious ideas are admirable," Zhang Mo sighed, pulling the man beside him. "Young Master Bao, didn't you ask me to introduce you? This is Young Master Qin, the owner of the

First Company. Young Master Qin, this is Bao Zhiheng, the owner of Zhuguang Tower."

"Young Master Qin, I've heard of your great reputation," Bao Zhiheng assessed Yan Ge with a hint of doubt and disdain. He couldn't believe that such a young person could manage the First Company.

Yan Ge disregarded his skepticism and said, "So, it's Young Master Bao. It's a pleasure to meet you both. Shall we go upstairs to see what's there?"

"That's precisely what we had in mind," Ye Ziyang chuckled. "I've heard that the jewelry in Linlang Pavilion is exorbitantly priced, and I'd like to be astonished. Even if we can't afford to buy anything, we can still feast our eyes on them. What do you think, Brother Zhang?"

"Exactly, exactly," Zhang Mo echoed with a smile.

The four of them proceeded to the second floor.

The jewelry on the second floor had prices starting from 100 taels and shimmered under the lights, captivating and enchanting the onlookers. The second floor had half the number of people compared to the first floor, but there were still dozens of individuals admiring the exquisite jewelry.

Bao Zhiheng approached the counter, casually scanning the display and his attention was immediately drawn to a particular piece of jewelry. It was a hair ornament primarily crafted from gold, resembling an auspicious bird with outstretched wings. The bird's head and eyes were made of green gemstones, and it held a blue gemstone in its beak, exuding an air of elegance and magnificence.

Yan Ge said, "Young Master Bao, if you're interested, you can take it out and have a closer look."

Bao Zhiheng indeed had his eyes set on the hair ornament, as his grandmother's seventieth birthday was just a few days away. However, his main objective for today was not to make a purchase. Besides, the Bao

family also dealt in jewelry, so it would be a subject of ridicule if they were seen buying just anywhere. Therefore, he hesitated.

Yan Ge didn't say much, leading Zhang Mo and Ye Ziyang to appreciate the other pieces of jewelry.

Ye Ziyang asked curiously, "How much is the one Bao Gongzi has set his eyes on?"

Yan Ge replied, "999 taels. 'Nine' has the same pronunciation as 'longevity,' making it very suitable for wishing the elderly a long life."

After admiring it for a while, Zhang Mo nodded and said, "Indeed, it's worth that price."

Ye Ziyang couldn't help but chuckle and asked, "Do you know that Young Master Bao's grandmother is about to celebrate her seventieth birthday?"

"I had no idea," Yan Ge said, surprised.

Ye Ziyang whispered, "Haha… You'll definitely make a profit from Young Master Bao's money. His grandmother will be turning seventy in a few days."

Yan Ge also laughed along.

"I like this one," Zhang Mo raised his hand and beckoned Ye Ziyang to come over.

Ye Ziyang saw that he was interested in a piece of jade that depicted two little people holding hands. The jade was set in silver, giving it a playful and adorable appearance.

Yan Ge commented, "This design is more suitable as a gift for a woman, a sweetheart, or a younger sister."

Zhang Mo asked the man to show it to him, "It is for my sister, she will like it. Wrap it up."

“Is this a ring?” Ye Ziyang asked, pointing to a pair of rings.

Yan Ge nodded and replied, “These are couple rings. They can be worn by engaged couples or those who are already married, symbolizing their affection for each other.”

Gao Feng approached to report, “Young Master, the boss has arrived.”

Yan Ge was delighted. How could Huangfu Yuchen be here? Although he had hoped that Huangfu Yuchen would come for the opening of the jewelry store, he had assumed that Huangfu Yuchen would be busy with state affairs so he only briefly mentioned it.

“Please invite him up.”

“Is he your husband?” Ye Ziyang teased.

“I came up by myself,” Huangfu Yuchen, who was in disguise, appeared at the staircase. He happened to hear Ye Ziyang’s words and gave Yan Ge a playful glance. Yan Ge had actually mentioned him to others, which filled him with joy.

Yan Ge felt embarrassed and glanced at Huangfu Yuchen with dissatisfaction. He then introduced him to Zhang Mo, Ye Ziyang, and Bao Zhiheng, saying, “He is…”

“I am Huang Chenyu,” Huangfu Yuchen promptly took over the conversation, walking up to Yan Ge’s side and putting an arm around his shoulder.

Zhang Mo and the others greeted him one after another. “So you are Boss Huang, nice to meet you.”

“Aren’t you busy? How do you have time to come? Are you alone?” Yan Ge whispered.

Huangfu Yuchen squeezed his shoulder and whispered back, “Your new store has opened, so of course I had to come. The others are downstairs.”

Zhang Mo, Ye Ziyang, and Bao Zhiheng observed Huangfu Yuchen and silently marveled at his aura.

When they first heard that Yan Ge had gotten married, they felt sorry for him because they believed that with Yan Ge's disfigured appearance, even if he had been favored in the past, he would surely lose favor now. But today, they overturned their previous speculation. The intimacy and harmony between Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge were genuine, not pretense.

"Young Master, this is a congratulatory gift from the boss to you." Gao Yun held a sizable gift box.

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Zhang Mo and the others showed a curious expression. Yan Ge opened the gift box in front of them and exclaimed, “What a marvelous item!” Inside the box was a complete jade carving—a pair of birds standing side by side on a sturdy branch, wings ready to take flight. Even the leaves seemed to bend under the fan-like motion of the wind.

The craftsmanship of the exquisite jade was top-notch, with the birds vividly lifelike and their eyes adorned with ink jade inlays. At first glance, one could easily mistake them for real birds and almost reach out to stop them from flying away.

Ye Ziyang and Zhang Mo were both amazed.

Bao Zhiheng, being knowledgeable about jewelry, spoke with a trembling tone, “To think that the branch and the two birds were carved from a single piece of jade. It’s truly remarkable. This jade piece alone is worth at least fifty thousand taels!”

Huangfu Yuchen shrugged it off and said to Yan Ge, “Consider it the treasure of your shop.”

Yan Ge looked at it fondly but said, “Let’s not calculate its value, there’s no need.”

“Why?” Huangfu Yuchen raised an eyebrow, waiting for his astonishing words.

Yan Ge explained, “If it’s considered the treasure of my shop, it means it can’t be sold. Even if it’s worth one hundred or two hundred thousand taels, I can’t exchange it for money and carry it in my pocket. Moreover, with such a valuable treasure in the shop, I’ll need to hire more guards.”

Zhang Mo and the others chuckled.

Huangfu Yuchen patted Yan Ge's head helplessly. "You're really good at taking advantage and pretending to be in difficulty. Fine, I'll send guards."

Only then did Yan Ge show a satisfied expression. He smiled at Huangfu Yuchen and instructed someone to keep it at the back, intending to display it once he arranged a platform on the second floor.

Zhang Mo, Ye Ziyang, and Bao Zhiheng felt it would be intrusive to interrupt the harmony between the two husbands any further, so they politely bid farewell. Each of them bought a piece of jewelry, leaving a total of nearly two thousand taels of silver behind. In the end, Bao Zhiheng decided to purchase the hair accessory worth 999 taels.

Yan Ge accompanied Huangfu Yuchen as they strolled from the first floor to the third floor.

Madam Yan, proud of her second son, lingered on the first floor, watching with great interest as the shop assistants introduced each piece of jewelry to the customers. She occasionally showed off the hair accessory she wore, also from Linlang Pavilion, a gift that Yan Ge had given her a few days ago.

When Madam Yan saw Yan Ge laughing and talking with a man, she was taken aback and recalled something Yan Xiaojing had mentioned to her. She guessed the identity of the unfamiliar man and noticed the familiar and affectionate atmosphere between him and Yan Ge. She didn't feel comfortable approaching them, so she turned away.

Bai Jushen, the person in charge of Linlang Pavilion, saw Yan Ge and hurriedly walked over. He was so excited that he didn't even notice the "boss's husband" standing beside Yan Ge.

"Boss, the opening has been auspicious! Linlang Pavilion has already made over thirty thousand taels!"

"Excellent!" Yan Ge grinned. "Tell everyone that at the end of the day, they will all receive a reward."

“On behalf of everyone, thank you, Boss,” Bai Jushen said, then returned to his busy tasks. His radiant smile never faded, making one worry if his face would start to ache.

Huangfu Yuchen saw Yan Ge’s delighted expression and couldn’t help but raise the corner of his lips and whispered in his ear, “Suddenly, I feel like 200,000 taels is too little.”

Yan Ge was startled. “If you really increase the price, I’ll go on strike!”

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled and quickly kissed him on the forehead while no one was paying attention.

“I’ll go back first. Stay safe.”

Yan Ge walked him to the door and watched as he boarded the carriage before turning back to Linlang Pavilion. He remained busy until the sun set, feeling weary with sore shoulders and legs. On the opening day, many renowned merchants from the capital personally came and required his personal reception.

After giving Bai Jushen a subtle hint, the other party bravely took over some of the hospitality tasks, sharing his burden. Otherwise, Yan Ge would have been even more exhausted.

At the third quarter of the You hour, Linlang Pavilion closed punctually.

Bai Jushen gathered all the staff members in the shop.

Yan Ge smiled faintly and said, “Everyone has worked hard today. May the opening bring good luck. Each of you shall be rewarded.”

Everyone rejoiced.

Yan Ge continued, “Receptionists, 50 coins each; salespersons, 200 coins each; security guards, 200 coins each; supervisors, 2 taels.” Linlang Pavilion had achieved impressive sales today, a promising start, but he did not set the rewards too high. There was an art to rewarding others; if too

much was given from the start, it might spoil their appetite and inadvertently backfire.

The faces of the staff members were filled with joy as they expressed their gratitude.

After they had enjoyed their happiness for a while, Yan Ge asked, “Do you know why I divided your rewards into different levels?”

They looked at each other, puzzled.

Bai Jushen replied, “Different tasks, different efforts.”

Yan Ge nodded. “Correct. I have one more point to make—I want to emphasize that everyone has the opportunity to climb higher. The higher you climb, the more you shall receive. Similarly, those without abilities may lose what they currently possess. Zhao Cheng has the highest martial arts skill among all the security guards, yet I only gave him the position of an ordinary guard. But today, he performed exceptionally well, attentively observing any suspicious activities in the shop. I have noticed all of this, and now I promote him to the position of the chief security guard, responsible for guarding Linlang Pavilion. He shall also be rewarded with 2 taels. Alright, I have said everything I needed to. Supervisor Bai, I leave it in your hands. Also, Xiao Chuan will temporarily work under your guidance.”

“Alright, boss.”

Yan Ge returned to the company to pick up Wang Xiang, and Deng Mama and the others bid them farewell as usual.

In front of everyone, Yan Ge took out two small brocade boxes and handed them to Wang Xiang and Deng Mama. “These are for you. Men, don’t be jealous. The jewelry from Linlang Pavilion doesn’t suit grown men. You’ll have your share when you get married.”

Zhang Rong and the others all laughed, feeling fortunate to have followed such a master.

“Let’s go back to the garden.”

Gao Feng and Gao Yun no longer needed to report to Huangfu Yuchen every day or live in the palace. After watching Yan Ge enter the palace gates, they turned back to the Gao residence.

Huangfu Yuchen looked at the weary Yan Ge as he walked in, put down the memorial, and pulled him to sit in a chair. “Would you like to take a bath first or have a meal first?”

MCUS Chapter 59

“What are you doing, Boss?” Bai Jushen asked.

Yan Ge was not busy with official matters in his office; instead, he was cutting paper with a pair of scissors. There were also some pigments and brushes on the table, piquing Bai Jushen’s curiosity.

Yan Ge replied, “Making toys. Do you have something to report?”

Bai Jushen reported, “A few days ago, a jewelry store in Yangzhou City, Jiangnan, placed a large order for jewelry with us. The goods have been prepared and are now ready. I have arranged for Changfeng Escort Bureau, the most powerful escort agency in the capital, to transport the goods. We will depart early tomorrow morning.”

Bai Jushen had been informed Yan Ge of this matter a couple of days ago. The Great Han Kingdom had ten major cities, and Yangzhou City was one of them, located in the prosperous Jiangnan region. Once the jewelry from First Company was sold in Yangzhou City, it would quickly become popular nationwide. Yan Ge put aside his current work and said, “I understand. This batch of jewelry is of considerable value, so make sure to instruct the personnel from Changfeng Escort Bureau to proceed with caution. You can go and take care of it. Also, call Guard Gao Feng and Gao Yun in.”

“Understood.”

Gao Feng and Gao Yun quickly arrived.

“Master, did you summon us?” they asked.

Yan Ge said, “There is a task to go on a long journey to Yangzhou. Which one of you will take it?”

Gao Feng and Gao Yun simultaneously said, “I will.”

Yan Ge chuckled and said, “Although it is a long journey, it is not for sightseeing.”

“It’s been a long time since we went on a long journey, so it won’t hurt to go out for a walk. Let Gao Yun go this time,” Gao Feng, being the older brother, generously offered.

“Thank you, Big Brother,” Gao Yun happily responded.

After Gao Feng left, Yan Ge instructed Gao Yun, “Changfeng Escort Bureau will escort a batch of jewelry to Jiangnan tomorrow morning. I want you to secretly follow them and assist when necessary to ensure the safe delivery of the jewelry to Yangzhou. With one team operating openly and another covertly, I will feel more at ease.”

“Understood!”

Yan Ge reminded, “There is no need to inform anyone else about this matter. If word gets to the ears of Changfeng Escort Bureau, they might think we don’t trust them, and it will only cause trouble.”

“I understand,” Gao Yun replied, “I won’t even tell my older brother.”

“Very well.”

After Gao Yun left, Yan Ge continued working on his jigsaw puzzles. Once he finished cutting the pieces, he painted each paper in different colors and set them aside to dry.

Chunxiang and Taohua entered, holding several rolls of paintings in their hands.

“Master, the paintings you requested are all finished,” Chunxiang said.

“Mhm,” Yan Ge took them, “Have you paid for them?”

“Yes, we have.”

Yan Ge opened the first painting, revealing a fierce tiger with its mouth wide open, leaping out of a green forest. Amid Chunxiang and Taohua’s cries of astonishment, he picked up the scissors and, without a word, cut the painting into pieces.

Chunxiang and Taohua knelt down anxiously, “Master, please calm down!”

Yan Ge paused, then couldn’t help but smile. “I am not angry. Get up.”

Chunxiang and Taohua exchanged glances, hesitated for a moment, and stood up. They wondered why the master would cut a perfectly fine painting into a mess if he wasn’t angry. The Young Master’s taste and hobbies were truly unique.

Yan Ge wrapped the pieces with paper and proceeded to cut the other three paintings into fragments. He then wrapped them up as well. Seeing that the two maidservants still had dumbfounded expressions, he said, “Go and call back Xiao Chuan.”

“Yes.”

Yan Ge watched them murmur as they left and shook his head. He hoped that there wouldn’t be rumors circulating in the company that the boss had gone mad.

Xiao Chuanzi swiftly entered. “Young Master, this servant is here!” he exclaimed.

Yan Ge smiled faintly, “Do you find it boring lately?”

Xiao Chuanzi shook his head, “Not at all. I work at the Linlang Pavilion every day, and though it’s busy, it’s fulfilling.”

“Good, you haven’t disappointed me,” Yan Ge patted his shoulder. “I have a task for you now, listen carefully…”

Another busy day came to an end as Yan Ge returned to the Tenglong Palace. To his surprise, he found the dining table already set with food.

It was the first time.

Normally, Huangfu Yuchen would only remember to eat when he returned.

Sitting beside the dining table was an adorable child, around five or six years old. He sat upright, behaving like a little adult. He wore a bright yellow garment, with a chubby face and fair, smooth skin, as delicate as a peeled egg. His round eyes resembled two black grapes.

—“Master, this child is incredibly cute!” Yan Jin exclaimed, “Especially his face, it looks so soft. It’s a pity I can’t pinch it!”

Yan Ge also commented, “Indeed, he is quite adorable.” It was hard not to like a child who was innocent and charming.

“Should I use him as a model when I assume human form?” Yan Jin pondered.

Yan Ge quickly stopped him, “Absolutely not. If you were to do that, it would cause chaos in the harem.”

—Yan Jin reluctantly gave up the idea, but continued to mutter, “Cute, so cute…”

“You’re back? We’ve been waiting for you,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

Deng Mande took the things from Yan Ge’s hand, and Yan Ge walked over to pinch the child’s face. It was indeed soft. “Yuchen, who is this little one?” he asked.

When he was present, Huangfu Yuchen would dismiss irrelevant people. At this moment, there were only him, Huangfu Yuchen, the child, and Deng Mande in the hall. Hence, he directly called Huangfu Yuchen’s name.

The child’s face turned stern as he pushed Yan Ge’s hand away, his little face stiffening. “How dare you! Who are you to disrespect this prince?”

“Oh, so you are the Crown Prince,” Yan Ge bowed and greeted, “Greetings to the Crown Prince, may the Crown Prince be blessed.”

The child glanced at Huangfu Yuchen, then lifted his hand in a proper manner, “No need for formalities.”

Yan Ge suppressed his laughter.

Huangfu Yuchen led him to sit down. “Let’s eat first. Has everything gone smoothly today?”

Yan Ge replied, “Tomorrow, a batch of jewelry will be transported to Jiangnan. I have hired Changfeng Escort Bureau to provide security and arranged for Gao Yun to covertly follow the team. However, I still have concerns. Our company’s reputation has garnered many enemies. In case…”

Huangfu Yuchen paused for a moment, then said, “It’s alright. I will assign some shadow guards to accompany them.”

“No, it’s not appropriate,” Yan Ge frowned. “It would be an abuse of power, regardless of the circumstances.”

Huangfu Yuchen stared at him helplessly. “Am I the type of person who doesn’t distinguish between personal and public affairs? I said ‘shadow guards’. Shadow guards are under my direct employment and cannot be considered ‘official means.’”

Yan Ge finally realized, “My apologies, I misunderstood. Thank you.” He quickly smiled charmingly at Huangfu Yuchen to make amends.

“By the way, once the jewelry is delivered, we will receive an income of 100,000 taels. It seems you need to prepare the imperial decree in advance.”

Since the First Company’s establishment, they had accumulated a reserve of 200,000 taels. However, once 200,000 taels were deducted, the remaining funds would be insufficient to maintain the company’s normal operations. But Yan Ge had already made up his mind. After his promotion, he would

borrow money from Huangfu Yuchen, but he would need to persuade him first. Borrowing money required a written agreement, which didn't constitute a misuse of power or an overlap between personal and public matters.

"Yuchen, you work hard with state affairs every day. Eat more," Yan Ge said, smiling brighter than usual. His attitude was clearly abnormal, causing Huangfu Yuchen to be more cautious. "Are you serious? Can you really produce 200,000 taels?"

"Of course, I am serious," Yan Ge confidently replied, "Just you wait."

Their conversation was deliberately kept low, and the little crown prince, Huangfu Yunxi, looked at Yan Ge, then at Huangfu Yuchen, feeling bewildered. He could only lower his head and obediently eat his meal.

After finishing their evening meal, Huangfu Yuchen glanced at Yan Ge and then at Huangfu Yunxi. "I will go bathe first."

After Huangfu Yuchen left, the little crown prince approached Yan Ge, his demeanor shifting from docile to arrogant. With a hint of hostility, he asked, "Who are you exactly? Why didn't you pay respects to Father Emperor? How dare you dine together with Father Emperor?"

Yan Ge teased him, "Guess."

"I don't need you to tell me," the little crown prince replied with animosity, "You are someone who wants to steal Father Emperor away from me!"

"Hahaha!" Yan Ge burst into laughter. "What a sharp child!"

"I don't like you, and Father Emperor won't like you either!" The little crown prince clenched his fist, threateningly waving it at Yan Ge.

Yan Ge leaned on his chin, looking at him with a hint of regret. "Is that so? But I quite like you. What should I do?"

The little crown prince paused, his expression conflicted. However, he quickly responded with righteous indignation, "Even if you like me, I won't

like you!”

Yan Ge smiled without saying a word.

Huangfu Yuchen, now dressed in casual attire, stood at the doorway. “Both of you, go and bathe.”

The little crown prince immediately stood obediently, waiting for the eunuch attendant to lead the way and followed closely behind.

Yan Ge chuckled softly. Such a young child, yet he knows how to put on a show. Truly befitting of the imperial palace, mature beyond his years.

After all three of them finished bathing, they retired to the dragon bed. The little crown prince, wearing a small white robe, sat alone in the corner, glaring at Yan Ge.

To avoid arousing suspicion from Huangfu Yuchen if the scar suddenly disappeared, Yan Ge, as usual, pretended to apply scar-removal ointment. He picked up the bundle placed by the bedside and gestured to Huangfu Yuchen with a glance. “Yuchen, I thought of an interesting game today. Will you play with me?”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded.

Yan Ge took out a tangram puzzle. “These are triangles, squares, parallelograms… We can use them to form different animals. Let me start with a fish… Do you see the resemblance?”

Huangfu Yuchen half-raised himself and pondered for a moment. “Interesting. Let me try.” He rearranged a few pieces of paper. “What does this look like?”

“Like a crouching cat,” Yan Ge pointed to two pieces of paper at the top. “These are the ears.” He keenly noticed the little crown prince subtly shifting closer and pretended to look in the distance, a playful twinkle in his eyes as he took out a paper bundle.

“Let’s play another game, a puzzle game. These small paper pieces can form a picture. Can you guess what it is?”

“I can’t guess,” Huangfu Yuchen replied.

“We’ll know after trying.”

Huangfu Yuchen watched as Yan Ge assembled the pieces one by one, deep in thought. “These games are all intellectual challenges.”

“Indeed,” Yan Ge caught sight of the little crown prince drawing nearer, curious and sneaky. He discreetly kicked Huangfu Yuchen, then whispered, “If you’re tired, you should go to sleep.”

Huangfu Yuchen closed his eyes and lay down, regretting bringing the crown prince so early. He secretly extended his hand behind Yan Ge and gave his buttocks a squeeze.

Yan Ge wiggled his backside, evading his hand and sighed playfully. “Falling asleep so soon? I wanted to play the puzzle game. Who will accompany me now?”

After hesitating for a while, the little crown prince crawled over, patting his chest impatiently. “Considering how pitiful you are, I’ll accompany you.”

Yan Ge played with the little crown prince, engaging in tangram and puzzle games until the young prince fell asleep from exhaustion. Yan Ge was also tired and collapsed onto the bed. Taking care of a child was no less demanding than any other job.

Huangfu Yuchen carried the little crown prince to his own small bed. When he returned, he found Yan Ge had closed his eyes, as if asleep, and pressed his lips against Yan Ge’s in dissatisfaction.

Yan Ge opened his eyes. Huangfu Yuchen’s hand slid to his waist, pulling him closer. “Are you tired?”

“I’m fine,” Yan Ge asked. “What do you think of the toys we played with tonight?”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. “They are indeed beneficial for developing a child’s intelligence. Do you have any other new ideas?”

“Yes!” Yan Ge’s eyes gleamed at the mention of business. “I plan to open a unique toy store in the capital, selling one-of-a-kind children’s toys. I even have the advertising slogan figured out.”

“Advertising slogan?” Huangfu Yuchen didn’t understand.

Yan Ge explained, “A statement used to promote something.”

“What is it?”

Yan Ge said, “Let your child outshine others!”

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled. “Not bad. It’s quite inspiring. Accompanying the crown prince is not easy. Those two toys will keep him occupied for a while. I’ll bring him here again in a few days. That way, you’ll have more leisure time.”

Yan Ge leaned closer and exchanged a kiss with him.

“It’s late now. Let’s sleep,” Huangfu Yuchen said, watching Yan Ge tiredly close his eyes. He covered them both with a thin blanket and closed his eyes as well…

MCUS Chapter 60

After attending the morning court and having breakfast, Deng Mande reported, “Your Majesty, the Empress has arrived. She says there is an important matter to discuss.”

“Send her in,” Huangfu Yuchen replied, engrossed in the stack of memorials before him, not even lifting his head.

The Empress entered the study and greeted, “I pay my respects to Your Majesty.”

“What is the matter?” Huangfu Yuchen asked.

The Empress said, “Your Majesty, the eunuch from Internal Affairs informed me that you have been frequently flipping the signboard of Yan Changzai in recent days…”

“So?” Huangfu Yuchen closed the reviewed memorials and picked up another volume.

The Empress wore a troubled expression. “Your Majesty, Yan Changzai is a man after all. He cannot bear you more children…”

Huangfu Yuchen gave a cold smile, still not looking up. “Do you truly think I should have more children? Aren’t you afraid they might hinder the Crown Prince in the future?”

The Empress’s face stiffened. “This concubine…Yan Changzai’s exclusive favor is ultimately detrimental. If Your Majesty prefers male consorts, there is Song Guiren and Du Changzai in the Chunfeng Palace…”

“Enough!” Huangfu Yuchen stared at her. “Empress, your duty is to take care of the Crown Prince and be a mother to the nation. I believed I made that clear from the beginning.”

The Empress’s face turned pale, and she almost tore the silk handkerchief in her hand. She forced a smile. “Yes. I take my leave.” She hated Yan Changzai lying beside her beloved person every night, the hatred running deep in her bones.

Huangfu Yuchen suddenly called out to her, “By the way, Empress, do you remember my second child?”

“The… the Second Prince… he passed away shortly after birth… it was truly… lamentable,” the Empress whispered.

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled softly. “Yan Changzai is the person I care for the most. If you truly empathize with me, you should take care of him for me. What do you think, Empress?”

The Empress took a deep breath. “Yes…”

After the Empress left, Huangfu Yuchen said in a solemn voice, “Guards.”

Shadow guards appeared. “Greetings, Your Majesty.”

“Keep a close watch on the movements within the palace. Ensure Yan Changzai’s safety is the top priority in all actions.”

“Yes!”

Yan Ge remained oblivious to the hidden currents within the palace. He only noticed some unfriendly glances falling on him when he stayed out late and encountered other consorts in the Imperial Garden. He faintly felt that Huangfu Yuchen had done something to ensure he had no worries within the palace.

The next day, before leaving, he gave Huangfu Yuchen a passionate kiss. The dazed expression on Huangfu Yuchen’s face made him smile for half the day even after he left the palace.

“Mastee Qin seems to be in a good mood today,” Ye Ziyang teased. Zhang Mo was also present, both of them accompanied by their children. Ye Ziyang’s son was five years old, and Zhang Mo’s nephew, also five.

“Yes, I am,” Yan Ge snapped back to reality. His decision to be with Huangfu Yuchen was driven more by rational considerations, like a worldly courtship with marriage as a premise. Now that he spent more time with Huangfu Yuchen and their relationship grew more harmonious, he gradually began to taste the sweetness deep within his heart, and occasionally felt a connection of souls with Huangfu Yuchen.

Ye Ziyang asked, “Young Master Qin still hasn’t told us why you wanted us to bring our children here.”

Yan Ge took out two identical small silk boxes and handed them to Ye Ziyang and Zhang Mo. “These are introductory gifts for the two young masters. They are mere trinkets, so you need not worry about them.”

Zhang Mo opened the box and shook his head inwardly. It was a jade pendant from the Linlang Pavilion, depicting an auspicious sheep. Its value was at least over a hundred taels, which couldn’t be considered a trivial gift for a child. However, both Zhang Mo and Ye Ziyang understood that since their collaboration with the First Company, they would often have dealings with Yan Ge, so they graciously accepted the gift without refusal.

Yan Ge made a gesture of “please” to the two and said, “Follow me. There must be something good for me to call you here, so you won’t say I’m not thoughtful.”

“How mysterious,” Zhang Mo and Ye Ziyang both held their children and followed Yan Ge to a brightly decorated shop. At the entrance of the shop, there were two wooden dolls, around five or six years old, standing on the left and right. They were cute and finely dressed. Several mischievous boys occasionally played with the dolls, shaking them back and forth, but the dolls remained stable. They were actually tumbler dolls. The smile on their faces made people feel fond of them, as if they would never cry no matter how they were mistreated. It was truly interesting.

Zhang Mo looked up at the plaque of the shop, the red cloth still covering it.

Yan Ge smiled and said, “This is a toy shop. It will officially open tomorrow.”

“Young Master Qin is really considerate.” Ye Ziyang quickly grabbed his nephew’s hand and walked into the shop, looking curious.

Zhang Mo held his son’s hand and followed behind.

Inside the shop, the first thing that caught their eyes was the counter selling snacks and drinks. There were colorful candies, pumpkin cakes, candied peanuts, twisted dough sticks, green bean soup, fruit tea, and fruit juices, all made in vibrant colors to attract children. In the center, there was a play area surrounded by colorful ropes. The floor was covered with soft carpet, and several six-year-old children were playing with toys they had never seen before. Around the area, there were ice buckets placed to prevent children from overheating, showing great thoughtfulness. Three young men with smiles stood outside the roped area, closely watching the children to prevent any mischief or harm. Several rows of neatly packaged and eye-catching toys were placed on shelves, while against the wall, there was a wooden bench for adults to rest.

“Uncle, I want to play too!” Ye Ziyang’s nephew looked at the children in the play area eagerly, unable to wait.

Zhang Mo’s son was also eager to join.

“Go ahead, but take off your shoes.” Ye Ziyang noticed several familiar faces in the resting area, all prominent figures in the capital. It would be beneficial for the younger generation to interact with their children, as it could establish connections for the future.

Zhang Mo patted Yan Ge’s shoulder and said, “Brother Qin, I don’t know what language to use to express my admiration for you.”

Ye Ziyang agreed, “Indeed. Ever since Jingcheng Fashion House collaborated with Yiyi Tailoring Workshop, business has been thriving. I

have to hold onto this money tree tightly."

Yan Ge lightly chuckled, "You don't need to be polite. It's also your own effort."

Zhang Mo and Ye Ziyang understood the underlying meaning of his words. Despite their friendship, if they were involved in anything contrary to Yan Ge's principles, no matter how deep their friendship was, it would be off the table. The two reminded themselves to be cautious and not make mistakes.

Yan Ge noticed Bai Jushen standing not far away, with an unfamiliar man behind him.

He felt somewhat puzzled and walked over after excusing himself here.

"Manager Bai."

"Boss."

"Who is this?" Yan Ge looked at the unfamiliar man. The man was dressed in fine silk garments, probably a wealthy young master from a certain family. He had four or five gemstone rings on both hands, giving off a somewhat ostentatious appearance that couldn't be considered high-profile.

Bai Jushen warned the man with a glance and walked a bit further with Yan Ge. A look of helplessness and exhaustion appeared on his face. "He is someone my father arranged for me… He wants me to marry him."

Yan Ge was surprised. "You are a flower-bodied man?"

Bai Jushen replied, "Yes, I never found a chance to tell Boss. Please forgive me."

Yan Ge didn't mind and waved his hand. "It's alright. Marriage is a lifelong matter. If you really don't want it, it's best to find a way to refuse. I don't want to meddle in your private affairs, but I hope your personal matters won't affect your work."

"I understand. Boss, rest assured, I will handle it."

“Ah!”

A cry of alarm came from a distance. Several employees crouched down, anxiously surrounding an unconscious child.

Yan Ge was startled and swiftly displayed his lightness skills, flying over. “What happened?”

Before anyone could answer, he saw the pale face of the unconscious child.

Poisoned!

His expression remained unchanged as he immediately took the child’s pulse. He was surprised to find that the child was Zhang Mo’s son.

Zhang Mo shook the child in panic and his face went pale, “Zongwei, wake up!”

“Don’t worry, Brother Zhang.” Yan Ge took out a silver needle packet from his sleeve and quickly inserted the needles into different acupoints on Zongwei’s body.

Zhang Mo looked at him bewilderedly. “ Young Master Qin, what are you doing?”

“Rest assured.” Yan Ge briefly said two words and focused on treating the child. The silver needles continued to shoot out from his hand.

Gradually, Zongwei’s complexion returned to a healthy rosy color, and his purple lips regained their natural hue. He opened his eyes and looked at everyone in confusion. Only then did Zhang Mo let out a sigh of relief and tightly embrace Zongwei.

Little Zongwei clung to his neck and called out in confusion, “Father?”

Zhang Mo stood up, holding Zongwei in his arms, and nervously rubbed his head. He looked at Yan Ge and said, “Thank you, Brother Qin. I didn’t expect you to have medical skills. Is there any harm to my child?”

Yan Ge's expression turned solemn. "Luckily, we discovered it in time, and there shouldn't be any major issues for now. He was poisoned with 'Purple Mist.'"

The onlookers were shocked.

"Purple Mist? That's a highly toxic substance!" Ye Ziyang said solemnly. "It is said that anyone who is poisoned by Purple Mist will die within a quarter of an hour."

"What?!" Zhang Mo was even more shocked.

Yan Ge reassured him, saying, "Brother Zhang, there's no need to panic. I have temporarily suppressed the toxicity. As long as the antidote is taken within half an hour, there shouldn't be any major problems. The young master is currently unable to move, so if Brother Zhang trusts me, you can leave him here for me to take care of. You can personally go to the pharmacy to get the medicine and rest assured."

"Alright, thank you." Zhang Mo entrusted his son to Yan Ge and quickly rushed out.

The customers in the shop were almost all scared and hurriedly left with their children.

Yan Ge remained silent with a solemn expression.

Ye Ziyang held his nephew tightly and sighed, "Thank goodness for Young Master Qin's astonishing medical skills. Due to the immense toxicity of the Purple Mist, ordinary people would never carry the antidote with them at all times. Once someone is poisoned by Purple Mist, they are usually doomed to die. I just can't understand who Young Master Zhang offended to be subjected to such a ruthless act against a child!"

Yan Ge spoke softly, "I'm afraid the other party was targeting me."

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Ye Ziyang looked at him in astonishment, “Are you suggesting…?”

Yan Ge said calmly, “During this period, there have been endless tactics targeting the company, so I surmised that the other party was coming after me. Young Master Ye, please consider this: if something really happened to the little one, Brother Zhang would certainly turn against me. Losing a business partner would undoubtedly slow down the progress of the First Company.”

“Who could be so heartless! It’s despicable!” Ye Ziyang couldn’t contain his anger.

“Boss…” Bai Jushen rushed in, gasping for breath.

Behind him was a tall young man dressed in black. The young man walked in slowly, holding a trembling ruffian in his right hand.

“What’s going on?” Yan Ge patted Zongwei in his arms and asked in a soothing tone.

Bai Jushen took a few breaths and said, “I noticed this person acting suspiciously as he ran past Young Master Zong. It seemed like he threw something into the little master’s mung bean soup. I suspect it was poison, so I chased after him. This gentleman also noticed and joined me in the pursuit. It was thanks to him that we caught this scoundrel!”

Yan Ge’s eyes turned cold as he stared intently at the ruffian. “Did you poison him?”

The ruffian denied repeatedly, “It wasn’t me, it wasn’t me…”

Yan Ge forcefully pulled his right hand, and everyone present saw a faint purple stain on the pad of his thumb and the tip of his index finger.

“Still not admitting it? Purple Mist has a strong toxicity. Even if it’s wrapped in paper, it would definitely leave stains on your hands. This is evidence. Who instructed you to do this?”

The ruffian turned his head and remained silent.

Yan Ge smiled faintly, “It doesn’t matter if you don’t say. Just wait to be poisoned to death. The other party had no intention of letting you live; otherwise, why wouldn’t they tell you to use oil paper to completely isolate the toxicity?”

The ruffian’s legs went weak, and he almost wet himself in fear. “It was… the Zhao Family, Zhao Yun!”

“Oh?” Yan Ge showed an incredulous expression. “Is Zhao Yun so foolish as to let you know it was him?”

With tears welling up in his eyes, the ruffian trembled all over. “It’s true! The person who gave me the poison had their face covered, but I saw the jade pendant hanging from his waist. I recognize it—it belongs to Zhao Yun.”

Yan Ge called Gao Feng over. “Take him to the authorities for thorough interrogation. If it truly is Zhao Yun, I will make the Zhao Family pay the price!”

“Yes!”

“The medicine is here!” Zhang Mo rushed in, holding a medicine package. “ Young Master Qin, is there a place here to decoct the medicine?”

“Yes.” Yan Ge had someone bring in a stove and directly used his inner energy to fuel the fire, quickly simmering the medicine.

Yan Ge didn’t hide the truth about Zongwei’s poisoning from Zhang Mo and Zhang Mo couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable knowing that it was

because of Yan Ge, but before the truth was revealed, Yan Ge had saved his son's life and now, he had personally simmered the medicine with his inner energy. The discomfort gradually dissipated. After all, Yan Ge was also a victim in this matter.

After seeing off Zhang Mo and Ye Ziyang, Yan Ge finally had the time to entertain the young man in black.

The young man in black was also a man of great character. He didn't mind Yan Ge being busy just now and calmly sat on the side, drinking tea. Bai Jushen accompanied him while occasionally glancing at Yan Ge.

"This young master, I have been neglectful. Thank you for lending a hand earlier. May I ask for the young master's name?" Yan Ge stood up and bowed.

The young man in black also stood up, returning the gesture with a bow. "How can I dare? I am Wen Xian."

"Wen Xian?" Yan Ge motioned for him to take a seat. "Could it be the renowned 'First Merchant of the Capital,' Wen Xian?"

Wen Xian, a dignified and composed young man in his mid-twenties, exuded an air of elegance. Since the age of sixteen, Wen Xian had been famous in the capital, with the business of the Wen family encompassing not only grains but also timber and transportation. Yan Ge had heard of his name before, but their businesses were unrelated, so they had never interacted.

"People's praise is misguided. The title of 'First Merchant of the Capital' is now to be handed over to someone more worthy," Wen Xian smiled lightly. "I have heard of the esteemed name of Young Master Qin. I just returned from out of town and, out of curiosity, came to see this new and unique store I heard about. To my surprise, I had the honor of meeting Young Master Qin."

"I am afraid I have become a source of amusement for you, Mr. Wen," Yan Ge said helplessly.

Wen Xian shook his head. “Young Master Qin is too modest. I noticed that during the incident, you also sensed the abnormality of that poisoner, yet you rushed towards the child in trouble without hesitation. It shows your strong sense of loyalty and righteousness.”

Yan Ge didn’t expect someone to notice this detail. Wen Xian truly deserved the title of the First Merchant of the Capital.

“You overestimate me, Young Master Wen.”

Wen Xian surveyed the empty store and sighed. “It’s a pity that the store’s opening tomorrow will likely be greatly affected.”

Yan Ge glanced at the devastated Xiao Chuanzi and idle staff members and smiled faintly. “It doesn’t matter. We will find a solution.”

Wen Xian raised an eyebrow, curious about how Yan Ge would salvage the current situation.

In the evening, Huangfu Yuchen stood at the entrance of the Tenglong Palace and walked quickly towards Yan Ge when he returned.

“You already know?” Yan Ge leaned on him, putting all his weight on Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen embraced him, a small smile forming at the corner of his lips. Finally, Yan Ge acknowledged his reliance on him, making him feel needed.

“Don’t worry. I have instructed people to investigate the Zhao family, to expose all the dirty deeds they have done and make them fall from grace, leaving them with no place in the capital. As for Zhao Yun, he won’t escape the death penalty.”

Yan Ge led him inside, his voice cold. “The reason I shared that story with them was to give them a warning. After all, I alone cannot dominate the market in the capital. I don’t oppose fair competition and have no qualms about competing with other merchants using honest means. But Zhao Yun’s

disregard for human life, his willingness to harm even a child, cannot be forgiven. Let's do as you suggested!"

Huangfu Yuchen kissed the corner of Yan Ge's lips and handed him a cup of tea. "I'm glad you let me intervene."

"Didn't you say I should have more confidence in you? You should also have more confidence in me," Yan Ge leaned against him. "No matter how tough or difficult it is outside, I know there is someone waiting for me here, someone I can rely on, so I have no fear."

"Likewise," Huangfu Yuchen said, feeling like he finally touched Yan Ge's heart. He hugged him tighter, lowering his head to capture his lips, gently exploring the mysterious territory.

After their passion subsided, Huangfu Yuchen spoke again.

"The First Company has become an established imperial merchant. I heard that even the palace recently placed orders for jewelry from the Linlang Pavilion. It's better to announce the company's background, so that no one with a lack of foresight will cause trouble in the future."

Yan Ge shook his head, resting on Huangfu Yuchen's shoulder, his fingers toying with his ear. "You've never revealed this matter all along, so you must have had your own plans. Don't disrupt your plans because of this. I can handle things outside. If there's a trouble I can't solve, I'll come to you for advice."

Huangfu Yuchen looked at his beloved with admiration. "Indeed, I have other plans. Since that's the case, let's wait a little longer. How do you plan to resolve the matter with the toy store?"

"Continue with the opening as usual." Yan Ge mysteriously took out a few things and showed them to him. "Look, this is…"

"Great idea!" Huang Fu Yuchen didn't inquire further after hearing about the new toy. "Shall we take a bath first?"

“Yes,” Yan Ge held his waist, and the two of them walked towards the bathroom together. “I have medical skills by the way. I will tell you more my in the future.”

The next day, the toy store opened as scheduled, but there were no customers. This was the most severe blow Yan Ge had received since he started his business.

Apart from the company’s staff, the only ones who came for the opening were Zhang Mo, Ye Ziyang, and Wen Xian. The three of them exchanged glances, feeling quite embarrassed as they looked at Yan Ge.

Yan Ge calmly took out several banners with inscriptions from beneath the counter. The banners read: “*Intelligence Toy House, Intellectual Competition. The highest prize is 1000 taels of silver for the winner, age is not a limitation.*”

“Go. Walk through the city with these banners, shouting as you go.”

“Yes, boss!” The embarrassed employees quickly took a banner each and ran outside.

Yan Ge dragged out a large bamboo basket and posted a notice on the wall outside the store:

–Rubik’s Cube game. A reward of 10 taels of silver for solving the 2×2 Rubik’s Cube; a reward of 100 taels of silver for solving the 3×3 Rubik’s Cube; a reward of 1000 taels of silver for solving the 4×4 Rubik’s Cube. No restrictions on identity or age. This reward is valid until someone successfully solves the Rubik’s Cube.

Below, the rules of the Rubik’s Cube were explained.

At the bottom, there was a red “Nan Yi” logo to signify the legitimacy of this announcement.

When Yan Ge, Zhang Mo, Ye Ziyang, and Wen Xian saw the Rubik’s Cubes for the first time, they looked at the basket curiously and picked one

up.

“So, this is a Rubik’s Cube?”

Yan Ge introduced, “This is the prized possession of our store. If you are interested, you can give it a try. The 2×2 Rubik’s Cube is 50 coins, the 3×3 Rubik’s Cube is 2 taels, and the 4×4 Rubik’s Cube is 10 taels.”

The three of them felt that the 2×2 and 3×3 Rubik’s Cubes lacked challenge and immediately purchased the 4×4 Rubik’s Cube.

“How do we play?”

Yan Ge explained, “The objective is to rearrange the colors to form a solid color on each side.”

The three of them understood and sat down to give it a try.

Yan Ge calmly sipped tea behind the counter. It didn’t take long before a large crowd approached, exclaiming with excitement.

The store quickly became lively. People assumed that solving the Rubik’s Cube was easy and after buying one, they didn’t leave. Those who managed to grab chairs sat down, while others sat on the floor, eagerly twisting and turning the Rubik’s Cubes in their hands.

Yan Ge watched as the Rubik’s Cubes in the baskets diminished one by one, and the cash box grew fuller with silver. A smile formed at the corner of his lips.

“I did it!” Suddenly, a young man in coarse clothing exclaimed in delight.

Everyone turned their gaze towards him, and indeed, the 2×2 Rubik’s Cube in his hand, which was initially jumbled, had been restored. The six sides displayed white, green, yellow, blue, red, and black colors.

Their attention then shifted to Yan Ge, waiting to see if the store owner would truly reward him.

After Yan Ge inspected the Rubik’s Cube, he nodded and handed him ten taels of silver. “May I ask for your name?”

The young man tightly grasped the stack of silver and said excitedly, “Oh, my name is Zhao Dabao.”

Yan Ge nodded, filling in the blank space on the prepared congratulatory announcement with his name and had it posted on the wall.

It read:

Congratulations to Zhao Dabao for successfully solving the 2×2 Rubik’s Cube, receiving a reward of ten taels of silver. Henceforth, those who solve the 2×2 Rubik’s Cube are not eligible for rewards.

Below that was the official seal.

Seeing that the store owner had indeed given the reward, the crowd grew even more delighted. Those who were hesitant before quickly purchased the 3×3 and 4×4 Rubik’s Cubes. They also found other interesting toys in the store and couldn’t help but buy some to give to the children at home. Although there was a poisoning incident before, as long as they didn’t consume the store’s drinks, they believed there would be no issues.

An hour passed, then two, yet no one was able to solve the 3×3 and 4×4 Rubik’s Cubes.

Some began to grow suspicious. “Boss, can the 3×3 and 4×4 Rubik’s Cubes really be solved? Are you trying to deceive us? Otherwise, how is it possible that no one has succeeded?”

“Yes, I find it strange too.”

“There’s something fishy…”

…people started to question.

Bai Jushen looked at Yan Ge with concern.

Yan Ge smiled calmly, unconcerned, and took out a 3×3 Rubik's Cube. "Pay attention. Are the colors on this one the same as the ones you received, all jumbled up?"

The crowd nodded.

Yan Ge rolled up his sleeves to dispel any suspicion of cheating and skillfully manipulated the Rubik's Cube's small cubes. The onlookers couldn't even follow his movements. After a while, they took a closer look and saw that the Rubik's Cube had been solved!

Everyone was speechless.

"What about the 4×4 Rubik's Cube?" someone challenged, unwilling to believe.

Yan Ge remained calm and retrieved a 4×4 Rubik's Cube, solving it just as effortlessly.

Yan Ge: "How about that?"

The crowd fell silent, their determination strengthened. Unfortunately, until nightfall, no one succeeded. Those with competitive spirits bought more 3×3 and 4×4 Rubik's Cubes, intending to give them to friends and ask for their assistance.

MCUS Chapter 62

Yan Ge returned to the Tenglong Palace after work and immediately noticed four solved Rubik's Cubes on the royal dining table—a pair of 2×2 cubes, a 3×3 cube, and a 4×4 cube.

"Back already?" said Huangfu Yuchen, wiping his hands.

Yan Ge pointed at the Rubik's Cubes, his hand trembling slightly. "Did you solve these?"

"The 2×2 cube on the right was solved by the Crown Prince, and I solved the other three. Why?" Huangfu Yuchen looked at him with confusion, observing his trembling fingers.

Yan Ge stared at him for a moment, feeling frustrated, and then let his hand down.

Unbelievable.

If it weren't for his knowledge of solving Rubik's Cubes, he wouldn't have been able to solve the 3×3 and 4×4 cubes. But Huangfu Yuchen and Huangfu Yunxi had never been exposed to them. Could it be that the people in the imperial family were not human?

"What's wrong?" Huangfu Yuchen asked, puzzled, as he touched his forehead.

Yan Ge replied, "Tomorrow, I'll bring back a 5×5 cube and a 6×6 cube!"

Huangfu Yuchen instantly understood and chuckled softly. "Okay. By the way, what about the reward for solving the Rubik's Cubes?"

“No, no,” Yan Ge waved his hand. “You obtained the cubes before I posted the announcement, so you are suspected of cheating. It doesn’t count!”

“You cheapskate,” Huangfu Yuchen sighed. “The Crown Prince only solved the 2×2 cube. He said he’ll come to see you tomorrow night.”

“No problem,” Yan Ge said. Solving the 3×3 and 4×4 cubes was challenging for the Crown Prince, but as long as it sparked his interest, it was considered half a success.

Later on, Huangfu Yuchen effortlessly solved the 5×5 and 6×6 cubes, leaving Yan Ge feeling defeated. But that’s a tale for another time.

The next day, Yan Ge heard that Zhao Dingshan accidentally killed his concubine and poisoned others under the orders of Zhao Yun. The evidence collected by the authorities was irrefutable. Both father and son were sentenced to death, and their reputations were tarnished. Even their Brush Writing Store went out of business. The Zhao family had no place left in the capital.

At this point, those watching and waiting finally understood that they should absolutely not provoke “Young Master Qin.”

Despite all this, Yan Ge remained calm. He purchased a large piece of land in the outskirts of the capital and began working secretly. The merchants watched him closely, noticing the excavation of numerous underground rooms, the felling of many trees, and the construction of identical houses. However, they couldn’t figure out his true intentions. Eventually, the area became restricted, with workers residing and eating inside. They couldn’t gather any useful information.

Before long, the capital became lively with the arrival of many foreign guests. Emperor Huangfu Yuchen’s birthday was approaching, marking his first Longevity Celebration since his ascension to the throne. Surrounding Kingdoms with friendly relations sent their congratulations.

The First Company seized the opportunity to make a fortune. However, Yan Ge believed that Emperor Huangfu Yuchen made even more profit. The

cheapest toothbrush now cost 20 coins (previously 4 coins), toothpaste was priced at 100 coins per box (previously 10 coins), and a pen was sold for 100 coins (previously 20 coins).

The foreign guests marveled at these never-before-seen products but found the prices to be extortionate. They contemplated buying only one or two samples and then replicating them once they returned home. However, they soon realized they didn't know how to make toothpaste or the material of the pen nib. Helpless, they had to spend a considerable sum to buy a large quantity. Deep in their hearts, they had one question: Why had the Great Han Empire undergone such significant changes? The new Emperor should not be underestimated!

Although Huangfu Yuchen's birthday had nothing to do with Yan Ge, many envoys had been entering and leaving the palace during this time. In case someone noticed a consort leaving the palace freely, it wouldn't reflect well. To avoid unnecessary complications, Yan Ge hadn't left the palace these past few days. He either stayed in Luoxue Palace, drawing various design sketches that neither Wan Xiang nor Xiao Chuanzi could understand, or spent time with the young Crown Prince.

The Crown Prince had completely changed in front of Yan Ge. He had been captivated by the endless stream of new and fascinating ideas and toys, always wanting to go to the Tenglong Palace. Yan Ge heard from him that the Empress had realized his fondness for the Tenglong Palace was due to Yan Ge's presence, so she intentionally restricted him.

Unfortunately, with the upcoming Longevity Celebration, the Empress was also busy. As a result, the young Crown Prince got a chance to sneak into the Tenglong Palace.

When Huangfu Yuchen returned to his chambers, he found Yan Ge and the Crown Prince playing a battle dice game. Yan Ge had already taught the Crown Prince Arabic numerals. The deck consisted of cards, each displaying a number from 1 to 10 and the two players rolled the dice to determine the card's value.

For example, if Yan Ge rolled a 4 and the Crown Prince rolled a 6, the Crown Prince would draw the sixth card from the top and the sixth card from the bottom, performing addition, subtraction, and multiplication calculations respectively. Only when both calculations were correct could they move forward six spaces on the game board. The first to reach the opponent's territory would win. Yan Ge had adapted this game based on real-world battles specifically for the Crown Prince.

He had already taught the Crown Prince multiplication mnemonics, which would enhance his memory and problem-solving abilities.

The Crown Prince stood up and saluted Huangfu Yuchen promptly. "This son pays respects to Father Emperor and wishes Father Emperor good fortune!"

"No need for formalities," said Huangfu Yuchen, sitting next to Yan Ge, his arm around his waist. He glanced at the board and asked, "Who's winning?"

The Crown Prince spoke up, "Father, it's me!"

Huangfu Yuchen looked at Yan Ge disapprovingly.

Yan Ge leaned in and whispered in his ear, "The little one has already lost five times. Let him win occasionally to boost his confidence."

Huangfu Yuchen patted his waist, gesturing for him to move aside, and then looked at the Crown Prince. "Shall I play a game with you?"

The young Crown Prince's face lit up, and he nodded repeatedly. "Yes, thank you, Father Emperor!"

Poor little guy. Yan Ge looked at him sympathetically and grabbed a banana from the fruit bowl. He leaned against Huangfu Yuchen's shoulder, ready to enjoy the show. He was sure Huangfu Yuchen would crush the Crown Prince mercilessly.

The two of them started by rolling the dice to determine who would go first. The Crown Prince got lucky and rolled a five. Huangfu Yuchen rolled a one.

“Hahaha…” Yan Ge burst into laughter.

Huangfu Yuchen turned his head and took a big bite of his banana.

At the next turn, the Crown Prince rolled a three. He drew the third card from the top and the third card from the bottom, which turned out to be eight and two.

The Crown Prince, eager to impress his father, exclaimed, “8 plus 2 equals 10, 8 minus 2 equals 6, 8 multiplied by 2 equals 16!”

“Not bad,” nodded Huangfu Yuchen.

The Crown Prince excitedly moved his chess piece forward by three spaces.

In the second round, the Crown Prince rolled a six, and Huangfu Yuchen rolled a two. The Crown Prince drew a nine and an eight from the deck. “Eight, nine… eight, nine…” The Crown Prince struggled to remember.

Impatient, Huangfu Yuchen said, “Taking too long, next round.”

“The Emperor is being mean,” Yan Ge felt sorry for the young Crown Prince.

The Crown Prince looked at Yan Ge in grievance, and Yan Ge pretended not to notice. The Crown Prince nodded silently, not daring to protest.

This time, Huangfu Yuchen rolled a six and drew a nine and another nine. All calculations were correct…

The game ended with Huangfu Yuchen reaching the finish line while the Crown Prince had only made it halfway. The Crown Prince stared at the chessboard, his eyes turning red.

“Don’t make him cry!” Yan Ge coughed lightly. Huangfu Yuchen smiled and looked back at the Crown Prince with indifference.

The young Crown Prince showed his resilience, taking deep breaths to hold back his tears. He picked up the paper with the multiplication table that was placed upside down nearby. “Father Emperor, I will continue to memorize.”

The Crown Prince walked to the corner of the curtain, facing away from them, reciting the multiplication table quietly. Yan Ge couldn’t help but feel heartbroken at the sight of his small figure. He turned his head to glance at Huangfu Yuchen, ready to say something.

Huangfu Yuchen sealed his lips with a kiss, sealing his words.

The Crown Prince was still there, and Yan Ge felt tense, trying to push Huangfu Yuchen away.

Huangfu Yuchen opened his eyes, teasingly glanced at Yan Ge, and kissed him even more deeply. He continued until Yan Ge had difficulty breathing before releasing him.

“When I was young, Father Emperor was even stricter. There was no ‘Yan Ge’ around to keep me company.”

Yan Ge teased him, “Are you jealous of your son?”

“I’m just a little jealous,” Huangfu Yuchen kissed his face and gradually moved to his neck, sucking firmly. When he saw the mark left behind, a satisfied expression appeared on his face.

Yan Ge smiled at him and embraced his shoulder, leaning in for a kiss.

After a moment of hesitation, Huangfu Yuchen said, “I have to appear with the Empress at the grand banquet the day after tomorrow.”

The smile faded slightly from Yan Ge’s face, but he nodded. When he decided to be with Huangfu Yuchen, he had already anticipated these possible situations. But now that the moment had arrived, he couldn’t help but feel a tinge of bitterness.

Huangfu Yuchen held his hand against his chest and said, “The grand banquet starts at the eighth hour of the evening. I will go to the Empress’s Yongyi Palace a quarter of an hour earlier. It only takes a moment to go from Yongyi Palace to the Hall, and there won’t be any time for anything else to happen.” Yan Ge was concerned, but at the same time, he felt relieved. It proved that Huangfu Yuchen cared about him.

Yan Ge made a clicking sound and his eyes curved up again. “Alright. I’ll keep an eye on you!”

Huangfu Yuchen smiled and his tone became more relaxed. “If you don’t want to attend, you don’t have to go.” According to etiquette, only the heads of the three palaces and six courtyards were qualified to attend the Emperor’s birthday banquet. Of course, there were exceptions: those favored by the Emperor could also attend, even if their status was not sufficient.

“Why wouldn’t I go?” Yan Ge replied openly. “I will definitely accompany you on your birthday.”

“Why not go?” Yan Ge said calmly. “For your birthday, I will definitely accompany you.”

Huangfu Yuchen held him tightly. “In the future, I don’t plan to have grand celebrations. We’ll celebrate privately.”

“Father Emperor, I’ve memorized it,” the young Crown Prince ran over.

“Recite it for us. If it’s done well, there will be a generous reward.”

Yan Ge looked at the two of them and suddenly remembered: it seems that Song Ruhao is also a palace head?

MCUS Chapter 63

On the day of the festival, even before dawn, the palace bustled with activity. Everywhere, red lanterns swayed, colorful silks fluttered, and fragrant flowers filled the air, adorning the entire palace with resplendent beauty and a joyous atmosphere. The courtiers arrived early, not for a morning audience, but to participate in the emperor's ceremonies, including the offering to the heavens and the ancestral worship.

Yan Ge felt like he hadn't slept long when Huangfu Yuchen woke up beside him, opening his eyes to see him dressing. The young Crown Prince was also awakened, groggily attended to by palace maids.

Huangfu Yuchen leaned down to kiss Yan Ge, whispering softly, "It's still early, go back to sleep."

As Huangfu Yuchen attempted to withdraw, Yan Ge held onto his neck, taking the initiative to deepen the kiss. Huangfu Yuchen embraced his waist, pulling the parted curtains together, shielding them from the sight of others.

"Happy birthday Huangfu Yuchen!" Seriousness shone more intensely in Yan Ge's eyes than his smile. "From now on, every year, whether it's your birthday or mine, I hope we can celebrate together."

"We will," Huangfu Yuchen gazed at him tenderly. "Time will prove everything. By the way, there may be ministers who have seen the 'Young Master Qin'. Now is not the time to reveal your identity. During the banquet, wear a veil or a mask."

Yan Ge nodded. After Huangfu Yuchen and the young Crown Prince left, he was fully awake. He got up and returned to his palace, practicing swordplay

and studying medicine.

It wasn’t until the afternoon that Huangfu Yuchen reappeared, accompanying Yan Ge to have some refreshments before finally going to the Empress’s Yongyi Palace.

Unable to contain his excitement, Yan Ge couldn’t resist changing into even more exquisite and luxurious attire than usual, urged on by the scent of incense and the promptings of attendants.

After getting ready, he went with Qiujiu to the reception hall. Four young eunuchs borrowed from Deng Mande followed behind, carrying the red-clothed birthday gifts.

Inside the reception hall, the decorations were equally festive, with guest tables set up and filled with fruits, pastries, and tea. In the corner, musicians played light and joyous melodies on their instruments.

“Yan Changzai has arrived—”

Before the hour of the Xushi arrived, several palace consorts had arrived early. As soon as they saw him at the entrance, Consort Zhao and the others cast their gazes towards him, observing the mask covering his face from just below his eyes to above his lips. They all covered their mouths and laughed, their mockery evident in their eyes.

They pondered -It was said Yan Changzai was the most favored by the Emperor, but today, despite allowing him to attend such a grand occasion, the Emperor made him wear a mask. It was clear he was afraid of embarrassing him!

Apart from them, there were also ministers and noble families present. Upon seeing Yan Ge’s attire, they could tell he was a male consort, but they dared not scrutinize further and quickly averted their gazes.

Only Prince Huangfu Yuhu stared at Yan Ge for a long time before retracting his gaze, a mischievous smile playing at the corner of his mouth, his thoughts unknown.

Yan Ge calmly walked forward, thinking to himself: Huangfu Yuchen, I've made great sacrifices for you. If you dare to betray me in the future, I will make sure you regret it!

Yan Xiaojing, the Minister of Rites, was among the courtiers. He felt distressed for his son but was unable to do anything about it.

After Yan Ge calmly paid his respects to the consorts and received the salutations of the ministers, he followed the guidance of the ceremonial officials and took his seat at the furthest end of the consort's seating area—his designated position.

The consorts' eyes carried a stronger sense of ridicule. They said he was the Emperor's favorite, but for such an important banquet, the Emperor didn't even arrange a prominent seat for him.

—"Master, when your position is higher, you must make them regret it!" Yan Jin defended Yan Ge.

Yan Ge smiled lightly. "Do I have to wait until my position is higher? The better my relationship with Yuchen, the more uncomfortable they will feel. Why should I take separate action?"

—"You are right, Master," Yan Jin said, "You are truly composed."

"Indeed."

How could he not be composed? Even with Huangfu Yuchen protecting him, he believed that if he made the slightest misstep, all the consorts in the palace would pounce on him. There were plenty of people waiting to see him become a laughingstock.

"Song Guiren has arrived— Du Changzai has arrived—"

Yan Ge was taken aback. Why was Du Zhengfeng here too?

Song Ruhao and Du Zhengfeng entered the hall one after the other.

Seeing them both wearing masks on their faces, Yan Ge's lips curved into a sweet smile. It must be that Huangfu Yuchen didn't want him to feel awkward, so he decided to have both male consorts from the Chunfeng Palace attend, and they were also wearing masks, thereby downplaying his presence.

As Song Ruhao walked towards his seat, his gaze remained fixed on Yan Ge.

Yan Ge smiled sincerely and amiably at him, secretly thinking: I wish you would make a move so I have the chance to send you to the cold palace.

Du Zhengfeng's attitude towards the other three male consorts remained normal from beginning to end, and it was the same now. After he sat down, he nodded slightly at Yan Ge.

Yan Ge secretly admired his acting skills. If it weren't for Huangfu Yuchen's revelation, he would never have guessed that Du Zhengfeng was a skilled shadow guard.

At the end of the hour of the Xushi, a eunuch's sonorous chant resounded from outside the hall: "The Emperor has arrived—The Empress has arrived—"

MCUS Chapter 64

The festive horns resounded, and the figures of Huangfu Yuchen and Empress Du Mu, and their little prince appeared at the entrance of the hall.

All the people in the hall knelt down, waiting for the Emperor and Empress to take their seats on the throne. They exclaimed, “We, the officials/concubines/servants, respectfully congratulate our Emperor on his birthday. May our Emperor live for ten thousand years…”

“Rise.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty…”

After the officials and consorts took their seats, the young prince sat on the prince’s seat, his eyes searching among the seats of the consorts.

He didn’t see Yan Ge, and felt a little disappointed. Suddenly, at the very end, he caught sight of a masked man, and a smile appeared on his small face. Yan Ge grinned in response, revealing his gleaming white teeth, and nodded slightly.

As the young prince was still very young, the Empress worried that he might make a mistake at such a grand banquet so she kept glancing at him, and inadvertently saw the interaction between the young prince and Yan Ge. She clenched the silk in her hands so tightly that she almost tore it apart.

Deng Mande started shouting: “May the envoys of the Mai kingdom enter the hall, may the envoys of Wei kingdom enter the hall, may the envoys of Min Kingdom enter the hall…”

Envoys from neighboring kingdoms who came to celebrate Emperor Huangfu Yuchen’s birthday successively entered the hall. Huangfu Yuchen

expressed his gratitude to each of them and invited them to take their seats.

After everyone was seated, it was time for the first performance of the evening: the presentation of congratulatory gifts.

To demonstrate courtesy and friendship, the ceremony of presenting gifts by the envoys was arranged at the beginning. It was followed by the young prince, then the officials, nobles, and special individuals who were invited due to their meritorious services, and finally, the consorts.

The ambassador from the Mai kingdom stepped forward eagerly, “On behalf of His Majesty the King of Mai, this envoy presents a nine-scented lamp as a tribute, congratulating Your Majesty on your birthday. This nine-scented lamp is a precious treasure that, when lit, not only rotates gently by itself but also emits a refreshing fragrance to invigorate the spirit. We hope Your Majesty will like It.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, “His Majesty of the Mai kingdom is thoughtful. Please convey my gratitude to your king when you return.”

“Of course.”

“On behalf of His Majesty the King of Wei kingdom…”

From dozens of kingdoms, the envoys offered their gifts one after another, and then it was the young prince’s turn.

“May the young prince present his gift.”

All eyes turned to the young prince, who was less than six years old. Smiles appeared on everyone’s faces, filled with indulgence. After all, he was just a five-year-old child, even if he was of imperial descent, one couldn’t have high expectations.

The young prince didn’t show stage fright. He held his head high and walked confidently into the hall. With chubby hands, he lifted the hem of his robe and went on one knee, bowing his head, “Your child congratulates

Father Emperor on his birthday. May Father Emperor live for ten thousand years!”

“Rise, my child,” Huangfu Yuchen said gently.

“Thank you, Father Emperor,” the young prince stood up and proudly proclaimed, “Although I am still young, I haven’t prepared a gift. But I can calculate the multiplication of any two numbers between 10 and 20.”

The Empress’s heart almost jumped out of her chest in fright.

What act was this? Didn’t they already agree with the young prince to recite a passage from a book for the Emperor during the banquet?

There was a slight commotion among the officials, most of whom were skeptical, waiting to see the young prince’s joke. A five-year-old child who claimed to be able to perform multiplication within 20, who would believe it?

Huangfu Yuchen was also surprised. He glanced at Yan Ge imperceptibly, then looked back at the young prince. “You only learned up to 10 the other night. How did you learn up to 20 today?”

The young prince knelt down, his crisp voice full of confidence, “Please forgive me, Father Emperor. Your child wanted to give Father Emperor a surprise, so I kept it a secret. I started learning up to 20 several days ago. The day before yesterday, I lost to Father Emperor in a game because I was too nervous.”

Many people smiled kindly.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “You’re not nervous today? Since you claim to have learned it, I will test you. If you answer incorrectly, it will be embarrassing.”

The young prince showed no fear. With a clear and crisp childlike voice, he confidently replied, “Second Master said, it’s not frightening to make

mistakes when you're young. If you make many mistakes when you're young, you'll make fewer mistakes when you grow up."

Grand Tutor Song Chaobang stroked his beard curiously, wondering who this 'Second Master' was. How could he be unaware of the existence of this 'Second Master'?

"Hahaha…" Everyone was amused and found this 'Second Master' intriguing.

"Your Majesty…" The Empress broke out in a cold sweat, attempting to smooth things over.

Huangfu Yuchen warned her with a glance, "Enough. I won't personally test you. I'll have the envoys and ministers examine you. Do you dare to answer?"

"I dare!"

"Good!" Huangfu Yuchen addressed the crown prince and others, "You shall represent me in examining the Crown Prince."

The young eunuchs brought a small table into the hall, upon which a pen and a piece of white paper were placed. One of the young eunuchs showed the paper to everyone on both sides before placing it down and stepping back.

The ministers were puzzled, "This… No abacus? How is he supposed to calculate?"

Huangfu Yuchen was also taken aback by the crown prince's unexpected move. He decided to pose the first question himself, choosing smaller numbers to prevent the crown prince from embarrassment.

"Crown Prince, I shall begin by testing you. What is eleven multiplied by eleven?"

Without hesitation, the crown prince replied, "121," his eyes narrowing with a smile. He had already memorized the multiplication table up to 11

times 11, 12 times 12, 13 times 13… He didn’t need to calculate; he could draw conclusions effortlessly.

On the side, a young eunuch with an abacus calculated and announced, “Reporting to Your Majesty, it is indeed 121.”

Huangfu Yuchen was surprised but grew more interested. He then asked, “Twelve multiplied by thirteen.”

The crown prince began writing on the paper, and after a moment, he lifted his head and said, “156.”

All eyes turned to the young eunuch, who diligently performed calculations with the abacus. After a while, he reported, “Reporting to Your Majesty, 156 is correct.”

The Empress breathed a sigh of relief and regained her composure.

The courtiers were amazed.

The envoy from Mai kingdom stood up, not willing to accept defeat. He respectfully bowed to Huangfu Yuchen and asked, “Your Majesty, may this envoy also present a question?”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded.

The Mai kingdom envoy asked, “Nineteen multiplied by nineteen.”

Many ministers from the Han Kingdom glared at him in secret.

After calculating, the young prince replied, “361.”

The Mai kingdom envoy widened his eyes and asked again, “Twenty multiplied by twenty!”

The young prince laughed and confidently answered, “400.”

Finally, the courtiers were impressed, congratulating Huangfu Yuchen on having such an intelligent crown prince.

The Empress had a delighted expression, but she also found it peculiar how the crown prince suddenly became so intelligent.

After the courtiers and nobles presented their gifts, it was the consorts' turn.

The Empress offered a pair of phoenix pendants as a symbol of eternal harmony between the Emperor and Empress.

But everyone's interest was focused on the three male consorts. Especially the envoys, as they knew that the current ruler of the Han kingdom didn't like men. Yet, today's birthday banquet included three male consorts, arousing their curiosity and various speculations.

Among the three male consorts, Song Ruhao held the highest position and presented his gift first. Accompanied by two eunuchs, Song Ruhao went to the bottom of the steps, while the eunuchs jointly held a rolled-up painting.

Song Ruhao knelt and said, "This servant respectfully offer a hundred longevities painting, wishing our Emperor good health and boundless longevity." The two young eunuchs carefully unfolded the painting.

Yan Ge smirked inwardly. The words made it sound as if Huangfu Yuchen was already in his seventies or eighties.

With a slight upward curve of his lips, Huangfu Yuchen understood exactly what Yan Ge was thinking. His seemingly helpless eyes were filled with affection and indulgence that were meant only for Yan Ge.

As Song Ruhao kowtowed, his mask suddenly fell from his face and lightly struck the ground, making a subtle "ding" sound. Song Ruhao quickly raised his head and pleaded, "Please forgive me, Your Majesty."

The officials saw his appearance and couldn't help but show admiration. They marveled at how the Emperor was truly the Emperor, surrounded by beautiful consorts, even the male ones possessed such remarkable looks—sharp eyebrows, starry eyes, and charming attractiveness.

Song Ruhao gazed at Huangfu Yuchen with deep affection.

Yan Ge clasped his hands together, supporting his chin, and smiled with a teasing glint in his eyes, aimed at Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen's expression remained unchanged as he calmly said, "There's no offense. Song Guiren, please take your seat." At the same time, he returned a teasing glance to Yan Ge.

Song Ruhao's face slightly stiffened almost imperceptibly. Since the Emperor invited him to the feast, it meant that he cared about him. However, Huangfu Yuchen didn't even ask a single question about the longevity painting that he had painstakingly created.

The Minister of the Ministry of War had a carefree personality and a rough voice, "Your Majesty, please forgive me for being rude. Song Guiren said this is a painting of a hundred years, so why does this minister think it looks like a landscape picture?"

Song Ruhao cheered up and hurriedly replied : "This painting is just an ordinary landscape, but in fact it hides a hundred characters of 'shou' in different fonts."

"So that's how it is. "The Minister of the Ministry of War said in understanding.

"Song Guiren has a heart." Huangfu Yuchen said.

Du Zhengfeng stepped forward before Song Ruhao had the chance to speak again, leaving Song Ruhao no choice but to step back.

"This humble servant has brought a zither to play a piece for Your Majesty, to congratulate Your Majesty on eternal well-being and the prosperous fortune of the Han kingdom!"

The envoys secretly chuckled. This male consort was indeed handsome, but slightly muscular, the Emperor of the Han Kingdom has unique aesthetics.

The crowd patiently listened as Du Zhengfeng played a powerful and passionate congratulatory melody, their hopeful eyes resting on the last

male consort, Yan Ge.

Yan Ge stood up and lightly applauded. Four eunuchs carried the congratulatory gift forward.

Huangfu Yuchen, like everyone else, was curious. Yan Ge had intentionally kept it a secret from him, and he had no idea what gift Yan Ge had prepared, but he was certain that it would be extraordinary.

“Your Majesty, the gift I present is one of a kind in the whole world. It can be used for daily life and leisure, as well as for military purposes.”

Yan Ge’s words surprised the foreign envoys. They put down their wine glasses and exchanged glances. The relaxed expressions on their faces suddenly turned tense.

Used for military purposes?

Could it be some powerful weapon? Perhaps even more formidable than gunpowder. As for Yan Ge referring to himself as “I,” they paid no attention to it at all.

Yan Ge had always been tactful. Since he decided to present this gift in the grand hall, it obviously meant there was no fear of others investigating. Huangfu Yuchen directly asked, “Is it a weapon, by any chance?”

Huangfu Yuhu saw that his brother’s gaze had become gentle and he looked at Yan Ge a few more times, attaching importance to him based on recent rumors.

Song Chaobang laughed heartily, “Yan Changzai’s words have completely piqued my interest. I’m sure my colleagues here feel the same way.”

The crowd nodded in agreement.

Huangfu Yuchen smiled faintly and said to Yan Ge, “You don’t need to keep us in suspense. Just reveal the answer.”

“Your Majesty, please take a look.” Yan Ge pulled back the red cloth, revealing a strange object with two wheels. Two young eunuchs worked together to place the gift on the ground.

Everyone’s attention was captivated.

“What is this?” Huangfu Yuchen asked curiously.

Yan Ge explained, “This object is called a ‘bicycle.’ Your Majesty, please allow this young servant to demonstrate its usage.”

“Granted.”

A small eunuch walked forward and knelt before Huangfu Yuchen. “Please forgive me, Your Majesty,” he said before quickly standing up, lifting his robes and strapping them around his waist. He mounted the bicycle, placing his feet on the pedals and smoothly gliding through the open space in the middle of the hall.

Someone couldn’t help but exclaim, “What a unique and interesting device!”

Yan Ge continued, “Your Majesty, with your busy political affairs, you rarely have time to exercise so the bicycle is perfect for you. You can exercise by pedaling while still holding your documents. If you feel bored, you can ride the bicycle and enjoy a leisurely stroll within the palace.”

Huangfu Yuchen praised, “Excellent! Yan Changzai’s gift has truly touched my heart. There will be generous rewards. Yan Changzai, you mentioned that this item can be used for military purposes. How so?”

The foreign envoys eagerly listened, afraid of missing a single word.

“That is correct,” Yan Ge replied. “Firstly, bicycles do not require fodder like horses. Secondly, bicycles have a small size. During military marches or battles, if there are narrow passages that horses or carriages can’t easily pass through, bicycles can be used to travel swiftly or even transport supplies. Moreover, the sound produced by bicycles in motion is much

quieter than the sound of horse hooves, allowing for stealthy approaches to the enemy. Furthermore, Your Majesty, please observe…" Yan Ge signaled to the young eunuch.

The eunuch dismounted the bicycle and, with the help of another young eunuch, folded it up!

"It is convenient to carry! If soldiers undergo weight training, it wouldn't be a problem for each of them to carry one."

The officials looked amazed and were filled with admiration as they listened to Yan Ge's words.

The foreign envoys, on the other hand, wore stunned expressions. Who was this consort? How did he find such a remarkable object?

Luo Wei, the Minister of the Ministry of War, stood up excitedly. "May I ask, Yan Changzai, where did this item come from?"

Yan Ge glanced at him but remained silent. He handed a piece of paper to Deng Mande, saying, "Your Majesty, this is the design blueprint of the bicycle. I humbly wish you longevity and the eternal prosperity of the Han Kingdom!"

Huangfu Yuchen looked deeply at him and burst into laughter. "Excellent! Yan Changzai has made outstanding contributions. He shall be promoted to "Shiren" today and rewarded with ten thousand taels of silver!"

***Ranks among male consorts from bottom to top–Daying, Changzai, Shirén (scholar), Cairen, Guiren, Shiqing, Caiqing (honorable official), Guiqing(Noble Consort), to Huang Guiqing (Imperial Noble Consort/Empress)**

Song Ruhao nearly crushed the cup in his hand.

Du Zhengfeng glanced at him with concern and discreetly patted his hand. The Emperor was in a good mood today, and Song Ruhao shouldn't spoil the atmosphere.

—"Ding. Congratulations on completing Main Mission 5 and being promoted to Shiren/Scholar by the Emperor. Reward: 500 taels of silver and 8 Foundation Building Pills. Main Mission 6—To be promoted to Cairen by the Emperor. Mission success rewards include: 1,000 taels of silver, the book 'Fengyun Immortal Record' for cultivating up to the Late Enlightenment Stage. Mission failure: Deduction of 1,000 taels of silver. Please choose 'Yes' to accept the mission or 'No' to refuse."

The unexpected rewards caused Yan Ge's knees to weaken momentarily, but he quickly composed himself and said to the system, "Little Jin, select 'Yes' for me."

–"Yes, Master," Yan Jin excitedly replied. "Master, the system can be upgraded now! After the upgrade, I will explain everything to you."

"Thank you for your grace, Your Majesty!" Yan Ge expressed his gratitude.

Huangfu Yuchen surveyed the area and said with a loud laugh, "Let the feast begin. May all the honored envoys and ministers enjoy the grand banquet to their heart's content!"

"Thank you, Your Majesty—"

The sound of music and dancing resumed as the dancers gracefully entered the central hall, swaying and twirling.

Envoys, ministers, and consorts raised their glasses to toast the Emperor. However, their expressions were somewhat complex. The foreign envoys felt restless and had lost interest in the banquet, eager to return and discuss important matters. This trip to the Han kingdom was indeed well-timed. If they hadn't come, how would they have learned such crucial news on time?

After three rounds of wine, Yan Ge quietly left.

Huangfu Yuchen, claiming to be unable to handle the alcohol, allowed everyone to leave their seats at will.

The consorts watched as the two figures left one after another.

Yan Ge waited outside the hall with a beaming smile, feeling extremely delighted.

–Yan Jin said, “Master, you’ve waited so long for the Foundation Building Pill. Now that you have it, can you resist the temptation to consume it immediately?”

Yan Ge smiled and said, “Today is his birthday, so I should accompany him well. Since we already have the treasure, there’s no need to worry about it running away.”

Huangfu Yuchen arrived quickly and took Yan Ge’s hand.

“You knew I would follow you?” he asked.

“I guessed.”

Huangfu Yuchen embraced Yan Ge’s waist and used light footwork to fly towards the Tenglong Palace. As soon as they entered, he dismissed the palace maids and kissed Yan Ge’s lips. The faint scent of alcohol filled their mouths, intensifying their senses, while an ambiguous atmosphere enveloped them.

Feeling the warmth emanating from Huangfu Yuchen’s body, Yan Ge nervously pushed against his chest. “Why did you suddenly promote me?”

“Didn’t I promise to elevate your status when the opportunity arose?” Huangfu Yuchen leaned closer, about to kiss him again.

Yan Ge pushed him away once more. “Do you like the gift I gave you?”

“I do, very much.” Huangfu Yuchen complied with his request and refrained from getting closer. However, his arms remained hugging him, and their bodies continued to be intimately close, while his eyes playfully teased the person in his embrace.

“I’m glad you like it. In the future, you must treat me even better.” The intense and passionate emotions in Huangfu Yuchen’s eyes made Yan Ge’s chest tighten, and he felt a sense of pride and joy.

Huangfu Yuchen pushed him towards the dragon bed and pressed him down. “How could I not treat you better? I know I spend too little time with you on usual days but I am already making arrangements for that. At the latest in February, I will embark on a southern expedition and take you with me.”

“Really?” Yan Ge was overjoyed.

“Naturally. Would I lie to you?” Huangfu Yuchen said. “The Han Kingdom was governed well by the former emperor. As the current emperor, I cannot remain complacent but must continue to develop. This southern expedition will allow me to inspect the situation in the south. I will set aside three to four months, and by then, you should also have your affairs in order.”

“No problem.” Yan Ge wrapped his arms around Huangfu Yuchen’s neck and pressed his lips against his, gently biting.

Huangfu Yuchen’s Adam’s apple rolled. “Is today’s gift in preparation for when your identity is exposed? Silly fool, there’s no need to feel too much pressure. Don’t you believe in my ability to protect you?”

“I do,” Yan Ge caressed his ear, “but if I have the ability, I can’t just sit idle, can I? Besides, these are my hobbies, so I don’t feel tired.”

Huangfu Yuchen fell silent. Having a capable lover wasn’t always a good thing, he felt like he wasn’t needed that much.

“Now that we’ve finished discussing serious matters,” Huangfu Yuchen’s hand slipped into Yan Ge’s robes, “we…”

“Are you eager?” Yan Ge didn’t shy away.

“No need for more words.” Huangfu Yuchen’s hurried breaths landed on Yan Ge’s skin, causing shivers to run through his body.

“Not yet.” Yan Ge smiled cunningly, flipped over, and pressed Huangfu Yuchen underneath him. He lay on Huangfu Yuchen’s chest, looking at his astonished expression mischievously.

He playfully patted his chest and gently caressed his face with his right hand. “If it’s too easy to obtain, it won’t be cherished. Keep waiting.”

“You…” Huangfu Yuchen’s face darkened.

Yan Ge chuckled, grabbed his hand, and said, “Come, let’s go wash up.”

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at him and remained lying there, motionless.

“Let’s go,” Yan Ge tugged at him again.

Still, Huangfu Yuchen didn’t move.

Yan Ge shook his head, let go of his hand, and walked towards the bathroom, unfastening his belt as he went.

Huangfu Yuchen caught up with a few steps, reached out his right arm, and both of them disappeared behind the curtain. The sound of water in the bath was louder than usual.

Inside the banquet hall, the atmosphere had become much more stifling compared to when Huangfu Yuchen hadn’t left.

Finally enduring until the end of the banquet, one by one, the guests bid their farewells. Song Chaobang looked around and, seeing no one paying attention, turned into a small path in the woods, hastening towards a distant place illuminated by moonlight.

Beside the secluded and dim garden gate, a figure paced anxiously.

“Haohao?” Song Chaobang called softly.

The figure in the shadow quickly stepped forward. “Father, you’ve finally come.”

Song Chaobang looked around and whispered, “The time for the key release is approaching. We don’t have much time. Let’s get straight to the point.”

Song Ruhao nodded and said in a low voice, “Father, we must take action. Given the current situation, I’m afraid it won’t be long before Yan Shiren surpasses me.”

“I didn’t expect the Emperor to show such favoritism towards him. As we discussed before, nothing will change, and I will make all the necessary arrangements. Don’t forget what we agreed on,” Song Chaobang said.

Song Ruhao remained silent for a moment, nodded, and softly replied, “I understand, Father.”

MCUS Chapter 65

When Yan Ge woke up, he found himself alone in the bed.

The palace maid heard the movement behind the curtain and said, “I offer my greetings to Yan Shiren.”

“No need for formalities. Where is the Emperor?” Yan Ge stretched lazily.

“In response to Yan Shiren, the Emperor is accompanying the envoys in the Imperial Garden, and asked this slave to inform Yan Shiren to rest well,” replied the maid.

“I see. When the Emperor returns, tell him I have returned to the Luoxue Palace,” Yan Ge said.

“Yes, Yan Shiren.”

Yan Ge returned to the Luoxue Palace and freshened up while asking the diligent Yan Jin about the current situation.

–Yan Jin excitedly said, “Master, the system has been upgraded. Not only has the space expanded, but it also has a ‘Merchant Shop’ function. Master, you can now trade with the system. But, let’s put that aside for now. Master, please take the Foundation Building Pill and start building the foundation. Once you successfully build the foundation, I will be able to manifest in human form!”

The space expanded? And there’s a new merchant shop? These two unexpected surprises made Yan Ge momentarily lose composure, and it was only with Yan Jin’s shout in his mind that he regained his calmness. “Very well, let’s build the foundation. I will take the Foundation Building Pill now.”

–Yan Jin stopped him in time. “Wait. Master, the time it takes to build the foundation varies depending on individual physique. The better the physique, the longer it takes to build the foundation, and the greater the benefits obtained in the end. You have already cultivated the Flowing Sands Sword Technique, and your physique is good. So, the time to build the foundation will not be short. I estimate at least three days. It’s best to find a way to leave the palace first to avoid arousing the Emperor’s suspicion.”

“No problem. I wonder where Yuchen is now. I’ll write him a letter, and then we’ll leave the palace,” Yan Ge said.

After leaving the palace, Yan Ge didn’t inform anyone of his whereabouts. He rented a small house in a remote area of the capital and instructed the landlord not to disturb him. After locking the doors and windows, he lay on the bed and took out a Foundation Building Pill from the system backpack.

The Foundation Building Pill was pitch black, smooth and plump, like a black pearl gleaming with a warm luster in the daylight.

A pungent smell rushed into his nostrils, making him feel nauseous. The smell of the Foundation Building Pill was indeed too unpleasant. However, he was someone who could bear hardship.

Without any hesitation, he threw the Foundation Building Pill into his mouth. After swallowing, the Foundation Building Pill, accompanied by a bitter and hard-to-endure taste, slid down his throat.

Almost simultaneously, a severe pain spread from his stomach to his entire body, sweeping through his limbs and engulfing his whole body.

Yan Ge had never experienced such intense pain before and let out an unexpected scream, falling from the bed and landing on the ground.

–Yan Jin’s solemn voice sounded, “Master, you must hold on and try not to faint. Although the Foundation Building Pill will expel impurities from your body even if you faint, it will weaken the strengthening effect on your physical body.” Though he felt distressed, Yan Jin couldn’t help in any way. Yan Ge could only rely on himself to get through this trial.

Yan Ge trembled all over, feeling alternations of cold and hot, with his sweat freezing and melting under the changing temperatures. His clothes quickly became drenched with sweat, and he managed to force out two words, “I understand…”

Then, he felt a gentle force emerging within his body, soothing his flesh and blood. Yan Jin had told him that building the foundation was a process of pain and pleasure.

The pain was due to the Foundation Building Pill purging impurities from his body and expanding his meridians, while the pleasure came from the spiritual power of the pill strengthening his physical body and nourishing his flesh and blood. However, compared to the intense pain, the sweet moments were incredibly fleeting. Despite the blood seeping from the corners of his mouth, Yan Ge could only grit his teeth, clench his fists, and struggle to remain conscious.

He didn’t know how long had passed, but his body and consciousness were numb from the pain. His entire body relaxed, his brain felt heavy and drowsy, and his consciousness sank into a profound darkness…

In a daze, Yan Ge could hear someone talking incessantly. His brows furrowed, and gradually, his awareness returned.

He opened his eyes and saw unfamiliar beams above his head and unfamiliar curtains beside him. He felt a bit confused. Where was this?

He heard someone saying, “Reporting to the Emperor, the water calamity in Jiangnan is becoming increasingly severe. It may require additional funds for disaster relief.”

Then came the voice of Huangfu Yuchen, “We have already ordered the Ministry of Works to handle this matter, and funds for disaster relief have been allocated…”

Yan Ge turned his head and looked through the hanging curtain. He saw some ministers dressed in official robes and couldn’t help but be stunned.

Was this the Hall of Supreme Harmony in the Council Chamber?

–“Master, are you awake?” A familiar childish voice resounded in his mind. Suddenly, a five or six-year-old child bounced into Yan Ge’s field of vision, startling him.

The child quickly made a gesture of covering his mouth, looking extremely adorable.

“Are you Little Jin?” Yan Ge asked mentally.

The child nodded repeatedly.

Yan Ge scrutinized him curiously. This child looked good, with well-defined features. At the age of five or six, it was evident that he would grow up to be a handsome young man.

“How did I end up here?” Yan Ge sat up and felt relaxed throughout his body. He lowered his head and examined himself. The clothes he was wearing were different from before. He wasn’t sure if it was an illusion, but it seemed like he had grown taller and stronger.

Yan Jin sat on the edge of the bed, swinging his little legs and shaking his head repeatedly. “Master, you’ve had a close call this time. You almost scared the Emperor to death.”

“Why?” Yan Ge wondered.

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Before Yan Jin could answer, Deng Mande shouted, “Court is dismissed.”

Immediately, the hanging curtain was lifted with a clamor, and a tall figure appeared before him.

Yan Ge looked at Huangfu Yuchen in astonishment.

How could he have changed so much in just a few days? His cheeks were sunken, his eyes hollow, and his cheekbones protruded. Although he still

appeared well-groomed, he was noticeably less spirited, as if he had completely transformed.

“Yuchen, what happened to you? Are you ill?” Yan Ge walked over, held his hand, and looked at him with concern.

Huangfu Yuchen silently clung tightly to him, his voice hoarse as he instructed Deng Mande to call the imperial physician.

Deng Mande quickly sent a eunuch to summon the imperial physician and sighed, saying to Yan Ge, “Yan Shiren, you have finally awakened. These past few days, the Emperor has been in great distress…”

Yan Ge suddenly remembered Yan Jin and quickly turned to look. Yan Jin was still sitting on the edge of the bed, but Huangfu Yuchen and the others seemed unaware of his presence. Yan Ge guessed that only he could see Yan Jin.

“Yuchen, I’m fine. But you…” Yan Ge looked at Huangfu Yuchen apologetically, cradling his face with tender affection. He really hadn’t expected things to turn out this way. Had it been many days since he took the Foundation Building Pill?

“Is there anything uncomfortable?” he asked.

Huangfu Yuchen shook his head, recalling the scene when he saw Yan Ge, and the pain in his heart and body tore at him.

That night, when he returned to the Tenglong Palace and saw the letter Yan Ge left for him, he learned that Yan Ge had left the palace and would return after three days. But three days passed, and Yan Ge had not appeared. He was filled with worry and asked Wang Xiang, Xiao Chuanzi, and even Bai Jushen outside the palace, but they had no idea where Yan Ge had gone. Yan Ge seemed to have suddenly disappeared.

Worried that something had happened to Yan Ge, he remembered that Yan Ge was carrying the scentless jade pendant with him and immediately sent out a falcon to find him.

It was only then that he found Yan Ge. But when he ordered his men to break down the door, he found Yan Ge lying on the ground, covered in dirt, curled up and motionless. Not only that, there were dried bloodstains at the corners of his mouth.

–Yan Jin also reported to Yan Ge, “When His Majesty saw you in such a sorry state, blood at the corner of your mouth, and missing for several days, his first thought was that you were already dead. He immediately spat out a mouthful of blood and held you tightly. The silent tears falling from his eyes were truly… heart-wrenching to see. It was only when Deng Mande felt your pulse that His Majesty realized you were still alive. After that, he brought you back to the palace. Because the medicine was still refining your body, you didn’t wake up. His Majesty was extremely worried and has almost taken you everywhere he went. He even had someone secretly arrange for you to stay behind during court sessions…”

“Please, no more…” Yan Ge’s heart ached, hugging Huangfu Yuchen’s neck tightly. “Yuchen, I’m fine. I’m sorry for making you worry.”

Huangfu Yuchen caressed his hair, but remained silent.

“The imperial physician has arrived.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Physician Zhang, check on Yan Shiren.”

“Yes.” Physician Zhang examined Yan Ge’s pulse and said, “Reporting to Your Majesty, Yan Shirem is not seriously injured. He has already awakened, and I believe there shouldn’t be any problems.”

With a loud bang, Huangfu Yuchen shattered the table with a palm. Everyone in the hall immediately kneeled down. Physician Zhang was so frightened that he cowered on the ground, not daring to move.

“There shouldn’t be any problems? When Yan Shiren hadn’t woken up, you said there was no serious injury. And now that he has awakened, it’s still not serious. How can I believe you! What is the use of taking care of you wastes!”

Yan Ge grabbed Huangfu Yuchen's hand, which had turned pale from the impact. He covered it with both hands, and he said to the others, "All of you, leave."

The crowd hesitated, but seeing that Huangfu Yuchen didn't object, they hurriedly retreated.

"Yuchen," Yan Ge stood up and stood in front of Huangfu Yuchen, cupping his face, "Look, I'm really fine. Look at me."

Huangfu Yuchen stared at him for a long time, took his hand away, sighed softly, and said, "It's good that you're fine. Your sudden changes were too abrupt. I will have someone send you back to the Tenglong Palace. When you move around normally, remember to disguise yourself." After speaking, he turned and left.

Yan Ge stood there dumbfounded. He left just like that?

When Huangfu Yuchen was out of Yan Ge's sight, he smiled self-mockingly, his eyes filled with sorrow. For four consecutive days, the scene of Yan Ge lying motionless on the ground kept replaying in his mind, causing his heart to ache each time. He thought that Yan Ge had been abducted somewhere, but the doors and windows were locked from the inside, so it was obviously not the case. He had long known that Yan Ge had many secrets, and he was willing to wait for Yan Ge to confess to him voluntarily. But Yan Ge's sudden drastic changes clearly indicated that those secrets were extraordinary. Because he knew nothing about these secrets, he couldn't do anything when Yan Ge was in danger. This made him feel useless and made him feel even more that Yan Ge didn't need him. He thought he had touched Yan Ge's heart, but in reality, he hadn't. They could be together only because of his own pleading.

If he was destined to lose, he would rather never have gained. Otherwise, his heart wouldn't hurt so much.

He was an all-powerful emperor, but he couldn't force that person's heart.

MCUS Chapter 66

“Yan Shiren, please leave. The Emperor is busy with state affairs and has no time to see you,” Deng Mande said apologetically to Yan Ge.

Yan Ge glanced at the closed palace doors. “Is he really that busy? Doesn’t he even have a few moments to spare for a conversation?” This was the fifth time and he felt a sense of panic.

What was happening with Huangfu Yuchen? Why wasn’t he seeing him? Just a few days ago, he was so worried about him, but now he was avoiding him.

“Well… Yan Shiren, the Emperor is truly occupied. Please come back next time,” Deng Mande replied helplessly. The Emperor’s condition had been really bad these past few days. He also wanted Yan Ge to persuade him, but the Emperor refused to see Yan Ge, and Deng Mande dared not go against his orders.

Wan Xiang hurriedly approached and whispered, “Young Master, there is an urgent matter outside. Bai Jushen is anxious to see you.”

“Whatever urgent matter it is, let him handle it himself,” Yan Ge replied impatiently. He was losing his lover, how could he find the time to leave the palace? He looked up at the roof, contemplating the possibility of forcibly entering Huangfu Yuchen’s sleeping quarters.

“Understood,” Wan Xiang said helplessly and quickly withdrew.

Yan Ge glared at Deng Mande and turned back to Luoxue Palace.

Deng Mande sighed and pushed open the palace doors.

Huangfu Yuchen sat at his desk, holding a memorial, clearly lost in thought.

“Your Majesty.”

Huangfu Yuchen put down the memorial and said softly, “He left?”

“Yes.”

Huangfu Yuchen fell silent.

Deng Mande sighed deeply. “Your Majesty, please don’t be upset with this old servant for speaking out of turn. Both you and Yan Shiren are unhappy, and it pains me to see that. I believe it would be better for you to meet with him and discuss whatever issues you have.”

Huangfu Yuchen waved him away. His daily life had already been infiltrated by the poison known as Yan Ge. He wanted to see him, but at the same time, he feared it. If the pain became too intense, he would steal a glance and make sure Yan Ge didn’t notice. That way, he could pretend that Yan Ge missed him too.

Yan Ge endured until the middle of the night when the palace was completely silent. Under the cover of darkness, he stealthily flew to Huangfu Yuchen’s sleeping quarters. Even with twenty sleeping chambers, he could easily locate the one with the most people by relying on his heightened senses. It was where Huangfu Yuchen was. Quietly, he pushed open the window and entered without making a sound.

In the flickering light, Yan Ge could see Huangfu Yuchen sleeping on the dragon bed. The young eunuch on night duty was sound asleep with his back against the bed.

Yan Ge activated the young eunuch’s sleeping acupoint, lifted the curtain, and then realized that Huangfu Yuchen’s sleep was far from peaceful. His brows were furrowed, sweat beads dotted his face, and his head shook from side to side as if trying to break free from something.

Was he having a nightmare? Yan Ge sat on the edge of the bed and held his hand, gently calling out, “Yuchen… Yuchen?”

“Yan Ge! I won’t allow you to die!” Huangfu Yuchen shouted, suddenly sitting up. His eyes widened, his pupils dilated, and his face reflected despair and sorrow, piercing Yan Ge’s heart like sharp arrows.

“Yuchen!” Yan Ge grasped Huangfu Yuchen’s shoulders and shook him vigorously. “Yuchen, I’m here!”

The Emperor’s self-control and restraint quickly brought Huangfu Yuchen back to reality. He saw Yan Ge, stared at him for a long time, and his expression turned cold. He pushed Yan Ge’s hand away, got up from the bed, and grabbed a cloth towel hanging on the frame to wipe his face. “What are you here for?”

Since they decided to be together, Huangfu Yuchen had never been this cold towards him. Yan Ge felt like his heart had been torn apart and was in great discomfort. He asked, “Why are you avoiding me? Do you regret it?”

Huangfu Yuchen turned his back to him, feeling a dull pain in his chest. How could Yan Ge ask such a question? Regret? Even if he was hurt deeply, he would not regret it. The pain in his heart remained, intensifying whenever he saw Yan Ge, but he couldn’t bear to let go of this pain. All the memories were too precious to give up.

“When I decided to be with you, I once thought that if you didn’t accept, I would lock you up forever. But I couldn’t bear to do that. Go, if it’s destined to be lost, I’d rather have never had it.”

“What do you mean? What do you mean by ‘destined to be lost’? Are you talking about me? You won’t lose me. Why are you saying this?” Yan Ge was confused by his random words, but he sensed his lack of confidence.

“Go, I need to rest.” Huangfu Yuchen lay back down and closed his eyes.

Yan Ge went up to him, tightly embracing him and clasping his hands in front of his chest, holding him tightly. “Yuchen, I know you’re angry about

what happened a few days ago. But at least give me a chance to explain. Or do you really want me to leave?" He knew he had kept too many secrets from Huangfu Yuchen, and he was afraid to hear a definite answer.

Huangfu Yuchen remained silent. Could he continue like this? Even if he was strong, he couldn't withstand the toxicity of emotions.

Yan Ge's chest was filled with a sour and bitter feeling. He climbed onto Huangfu Yuchen's body, tightly embracing his neck. "Yuchen…" This was the person he loved, the person who loved him, he couldn't lose him.

"I've always known that you have many secrets, and I was willing to wait for the day you would tell me willingly," Huangfu Yuchen said softly. "But if these secrets might endanger your life, you shouldn't hide them from me. It makes me feel like you don't care about me."

"It's not like that!" Yan Ge hurriedly said, "Listen to my explanation."

Huangfu Yuchen remained silent.

Yan Ge didn't blame him. Even the strongest person would have moments of fear when it came to emotions, fear of losing the person they loved. Huangfu Yuchen was like that, and he was too. He had fallen in love with Huangfu Yuchen, and he would never allow Huangfu Yuchen to leave him.

He forcefully pulled Huangfu Yuchen up to a sitting position.

Huangfu Yuchen looked at him, his eyes reddened from anxiety, and his face tense. He gently held him. "What should I do with you? I want to push you away, but I can't bear it. I want to hold you, but I can't reach your heart. Why do you take risks where I can't see? Do you know how it felt when I saw you lying there with blood on your lips? When I thought you were dead, my heart died too. Everything went dark in front of me, and I didn't know where to go. If I hadn't given you the scentless jade pendant, if you really died somewhere unknown to me… Yan Ge, my heart is so greedy. Once I have something, I don't want to lose it. I only ask you this time, can I have you? If not, it's better to have never had you."

“I can! You already have me!” Yan Ge looked into his eyes. “Listen to me first, okay?”

Huangfu Yuchen caressed his cheek, noticing that Yan Ge had become thinner in the past few days.

“Go ahead,” he said.

Yan Ge held both of his hands. “I do have two secrets. The reason I didn’t tell you is because I was afraid you wouldn’t be able to accept them.”

“Unless these two secrets require you to leave me, I won’t be unable to accept them.” Huangfu Yuchen pinched his hand.

Yan Ge said, “Let me tell you the first secret. I am not the real Yan Ge.”

Huangfu Yuchen didn’t understand. “Not Yan Ge? Then who are you?”

Yan Ge didn’t know if Huangfu Yuchen would still be so calm when he finds out that he was actually a reincarnated soul. But he told the truth, “To be precise, I am Yan Ge, but not Yan Xiaojing’s son Yan Ge. I am another person, also named Yan Ge, who came back to life by borrowing his body after Yan Xiaojing’s son died. It’s a case of reincarnation.”

Huangfu Yuchen remained silent for a long time.

Yan Ge’s heart sank to the bottom. He forced a bitter smile. “I knew you wouldn’t be able to accept it…”

His chin was suddenly lifted and he met Huangfu Yuchen’s gaze.

“When did you become Yan Xiaojing’s son? Are you two different people or the same person after entering the palace?” Huangfu Yuchen asked calmly.

Yan Ge replied softly, “That Yan Ge died when he jumped into the lake. Since then, I became him and I don’t know the reason. But the person who entered the palace has always been me.”

Huangfu Yuchen tightly embraced him. “If it has always been you, then that’s good. He won’t come back in the future, right?!”

Yan Ge heard his meaning and hugged him with joy. “Yes, even in the future, it will always be me!”

Huangfu Yuchen finally felt his trembling body relax and he kissed Yan Ge’s lips with affection. “Do Yan Xiaojing and the others know about this?”

“They don’t know. I dare not tell them. I’m afraid they will see me as a monster and burn me to death,” Yan Ge said self-mockingly.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Aren’t you a monster. Since you’re not a monster, why were you able to reincarnate in a corpse?”

Yan Ge leaned against his chest, rolled his eyes, and looked at him speechlessly.

This guy! He thought he was a monster, but he wasn’t afraid? Admirable, truly admirable! Could it be that there was really dragon energy protecting him, so he wasn’t afraid of demons and monsters?

“Of course not. As for why I could reincarnate, it might be because my name and appearance are the same as Yan Ge’s, and there exists some mysterious connection between us, so I could occupy his body after he died. It could also be related to my second secret.”

“What is it?” Huangfu Yuchen asked calmly.

Yan Ge said, “Don’t be afraid. Let me introduce someone to you first.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded.

“Little Jin.”

As soon as the words fell, a lovely child appeared out of thin air, sitting cross-legged at the other end of the bed, smiling at the two of them.

“Greetings, Your Majesty.”

Huangfu Yuchen was taken aback and stood in front of Yan Ge. They were so close, yet he hadn’t sensed the presence of this child!

“Who are you?”

“Yuchen, don’t be nervous. He is someone I know,” Yan Ge moved to his side and embraced his waist, “He is Yan Jin. You can call him Little Jin. After I died in another world, I coincidentally met him. He attached himself to me and recognized me as his master. I gave him the name Yan Jin. I don’t know how to explain his existence to you in a way that you’ll understand. But you can perceive him as a ‘deity.’ Due to the limitations of being a ‘deity,’ I couldn’t reveal my second secret to you. It is closely related to my identity, and revealing it would result in self-destruction.”

Huangfu Yuchen was shocked. He held Yan Ge tightly, keeping a vigilant eye on Yan Jin. “You don’t have to say anything more. I won’t ask.”

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Yan Ge smiled and shook his head, “It’s alright. I won’t hide anything that can be revealed. I can only tell you that I must complete some tasks he gives me, and through these tasks, I can obtain rewards. The reason I fainted a few days ago was because I took the reward he gave me, the Foundation Building Pill.”

“He is a ‘deity,’ wouldn’t he be able to easily eliminate you?” Huangfu Yuchen regarded Yan Jin with caution.

Yan Jin helplessly shrugged his shoulders.

Yan Ge said, “No, he won’t. Although he is a deity, he has to rely on me to survive and grow, so he will never pose a threat to me. You can trust him.”

Only then did Huangfu Yuchen let go of his worries.

Yan Ge continued, “After taking the Foundation Building Pill, one can cultivate into an immortal. Are you willing to cultivate with me?”

Huangfu Yuchen looked at him in astonishment, “Cultivate into an immortal?”

“Yes, are you willing?” Yan Ge earnestly gazed at him, “We can cultivate together and become a divine couple. Once we achieve mastery, we can even leave this mortal world and explore other realms.”

“Of course, I am willing.” Huangfu Yuchen embraced him tightly, “If I can also cultivate, I won’t worry about you running away. No matter where you go, I will capture you and make sure you can never leave me.”

Yan Ge proudly smiled at him, “You have to practice the Flowing Sands Sword Technique to lay the foundation. Hehe, I cultivated before you, so my cultivation will surpass yours. If you dare to wrong me, I will teach you a lesson. Hahaha!”

Huangfu Yuchen laughed and contentedly sighed, “Little fool. Anyway, now that I finally have you, I will cherish you with all my heart.”

After revealing the two greatest secrets, Yan Ge felt completely at ease. The two of them gazed at each other, feeling a profound atmosphere. It seemed as if their hearts were tightly intertwined, and they unconsciously drew closer to each other, their lips almost touching.

The disregarded Yan Jin couldn’t help but protest, “Master, master’s husband, I’m still here.”

Yan Ge was speechless. What master’s husband?

Huangfu Yuchen laughed happily.

“Little Jin,” Yan Ge playfully tapped Yan Jin.

Yan Jin covered his head and wiggled, “Master, master’s husband, I don’t want to remain invisible all the time. Can you arrange an identity for me? I want to play with the little crown prince.”

Huangfu Yuchen looked at Yan Ge.

Yan Ge said, “Yuchen, although Little Jin appears like a child, he actually knows a lot. If he stays with the little crown prince, he can not only protect him but also teach him some things.”

Huangfu Yuchen pondered for a moment and reluctantly said, “If we want to keep him in the palace and ensure that no one with ill intentions bothers him, the best way is for him to be my son, a secret child?”

Yan Ge was speechless.

“A prince? Great!” Yan Jin exclaimed happily, “I have never been a prince before.”

Yan Ge scratched his head, “Wouldn’t that harm your reputation?”

Yan Jin narrowed his eyes at him, “Once married, the water is thrown away.”

Yan Ge choked.

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled and kissed his face, reassuring him, “Here’s the plan: I will arrange an identity for him outside the palace first, then acknowledge him as my adopted son, and confer him the title of prince. This identity won’t threaten the interests of the legitimate prince, and both the court and the harem won’t object.”

Yan Ge nodded, “Let’s do as you say.”

Huangfu Yuchen looked at Yan Jin, “Can you leave now?”

“I won’t disturb your private moment,” Yan Jin obediently disappeared.

Huangfu Yuchen embraced Yan Ge as they lay down together. His heart was fluctuating wildly, he was finally able to fully feel Yan Ge’s presence. His gaze and fingers traced from Yan Ge’s forehead, slid across his eyebrows, then to his eyes and nose, gliding over his cheeks, and finally resting on his rosy lips. Their heads drew closer, and their lips met, gently sucking.

Unable to resist Huangfu Yuchen’s teasing tenderness, Yan Ge actively deepened the kiss.

Huangfu Yuchen’s chest heaved rapidly as he suddenly pressed Yan Ge beneath him, panting heavily as he stared at him. His dark eyes were veiled by a mist of passion and their entwined bodies felt each other’s heat. “I can’t wait any longer.”

Yan Ge turned his head and with a wave of his hand, extinguished the lanterns…

Huangfu Yuchen woke up from a dream and saw the person from his dream in his embrace. A profound sense of satisfaction overwhelmed him, and he gently kissed Yan Ge's bare shoulder. The ice in the basin next to the bed had completely melted, but he didn't call for someone to add ice, fearing it would disturb Yan Ge. Reluctant to leave Yan Ge's side, he picked up a fan and gently fanned him.

Yan Ge, perhaps also having a pleasant dream, curled his lips slightly, causing Huangfu Yuchen to do the same.

Yan Ge was awakened by hunger and immediately felt the soreness all over his body, as if he had been crushed. Remembering what happened last night, his face flushed. Both of them were full of passion and had excellent stamina, so they engaged in amorous activities until dawn.

"You're awake," Huangfu Yuchen was sitting by the bedside, fully clothed and reading a book. When he heard movement, he lowered his head and pecked Yan Ge's lips, smiling as he said, "You must be hungry, Deng Mande?"

"This slave is here."

Huangfu Yuchen took the tray from Deng Mande's hand. "This is the meat and vegetable porridge that I asked the kitchen to cook, your favorite. If you're still tired, eat first and then sleep."

Yan Ge sat up and smelled the aroma, hesitating. "I haven't brushed my teeth."

"It's fine to brush after eating," Huangfu Yuchen tucked a loose strand of hair behind his ear.

Yan Ge nodded and took the bowl of porridge. It wasn't scalding hot, obviously Huangfu Yuchen had purposely kept it at this temperature.

Yan Ge realized that his appetite had increased since he built the foundation. It took him four bowls of porridge to feel full.

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled lightly. He patted his stomach, and set the porridge aside, allowing Yan Ge to lean against him. “Go back to sleep, I’ll stay here with you.”

“I won’t sleep anymore.” Yan Ge turned his head to look at him and smiled. He couldn’t explain why he was smiling, but he felt a pleasant sensation throughout his body and mind. To be in mutual love with someone was the greatest happiness in the world, giving him the confidence to face any difficulties as long as that person was by his side.

Huangfu Yuchen’s lips also carried a smile, his eyes fixed on Yan Ge’s as he occasionally lightly kissed his eyelids and cheeks.

They didn’t speak, yet they both experienced a deep sense of contentment.

Huangfu Yuchen got up and rummaged through the low cabinet at the head of the bed.

“What are you looking for?”

Huangfu Yuchen took out a red jade box and opened it, revealing two rings placed side by side. Each had half a silver heart, and when joined together, formed a complete heart.

“These are the matching rings from Linlang Pavilion. When did you buy them?” Yan Ge’s heart felt sweet, and that sweetness bloomed into a slightly silly smile on his face.

Huangfu Yuchen took out the smaller one. “I bought them a long time ago. Do you like it?”

Yan Ge nodded, and Huangfu Yuchen tried to put the ring on his left ring finger, but it wouldn’t fit past the joint. Annoyed, he furrowed his brow. “You’ve grown taller now, so naturally your fingers have also become thicker.”

Yan Ge laughed and jumped off the bed. “You didn’t mention it, so I forgot. Since I took the Foundation Pill, I haven’t seen my current appearance.”

“Why?” Huangfu Yuchen followed him.

Yan Ge’s face was flushed, and he glanced at him. “How can you ask that? You’ve been avoiding me all this time, and I’ve been so troubled, solely focused on how to resolve the deadlock between us. I didn’t have the mind to pay attention to the changes in my own body.”

He walked up to the mirror, gazing at his reflection with a satisfied smile. Now, he was at least 1.8 meters tall, with a slender but strong body. His appearance hadn’t changed much, but his features had lost some of their youthful innocence, revealing a more handsome charm. His body shouldn’t undergo any further changes in the short term. Unfortunately, he was still shorter than Huangfu Yuchen, who was at least 1.86 meters tall.

“It’s difficult to hide this appearance now,” Huangfu Yuchen embraced him from behind.

“Little Jin has a solution,” Yan Ge said, “Let me copy the Flowing Sands Sword Technique for you, so you can learn it as soon as possible.”

“There’s no rush today,” Huangfu Yuchen said, biting his earlobe. “We’ll be busy in the days to come. Today, nothing else matters.”

Yan Ge turned his head and pecked his lips quickly before swiftly leaving. “I haven’t brushed my teeth,” he said, walking away.

This guy. Huangfu Yuchen shook his head and followed him to the washroom, watching the foam around his mouth, a playful smile forming on his lips.

Yan Ge deliberately approached, wanting to kiss his face, wearing a mischievous smile.

“Don’t tease me, be careful not to choke,” Huangfu Yuchen patted his buttocks and picked up a towel, soaking it in water.

“En,” Yan Ge spat out the foam, “By the way, my elder brother is getting married soon. Will you go?”

Huangfu Yuchen handed him the wet towel. “Of course. It’s a formal meeting with my future father-in-law and mother-in-law, it’s an occasion not to be missed.”

Yan Ge scoffed lightly. “Father-in-law and mother-in-law indeed.”

Huangfu Yuchen smiled and used the wet towel to wipe his mouth. Without a word, he kissed him, and soon enough, the two of them ended up back in bed…

The next day, they couldn’t indulge any longer. Huangfu Yuchen sent Yan Ge off and went to attend court, while Yan Ge himself got up to prepare for work.

–“Master, now you should have time to hear my report on the system’s changes, right?” Yan Jin teased Yan Ge.

Yan Jin cast an illusion on him. In the eyes of others, only the scar on his face had disappeared, and his features looked exactly the same as before. Yan Jin remained invisible, sitting on the floor with crossed legs.

They were on the carriage leaving the palace. Yan Ge’s waist was a bit sore, but he didn’t want Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi to notice anything unusual, so he endured it.

Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi had been in the palace for a long time and were not dull-witted. They were afraid that their master had a thin skin, so they pretended not to know, feeling happy for him in their hearts.

“Yes, go ahead,” Yan Ge said curiously.

–Yan Jin proudly said, “The upgraded system has two main changes. First, the backpack has become larger, now it can hold at least one thousand cubic units. The second change is the addition of a store function to the system.”

“Does the store function mean I can buy anything?” Yan Ge asked.

–“You can say that,” Yan Jin said. “The store offers a variety of goods in terms of food, clothing, shelter, and transportation. However, currently, the

available types of goods are limited. As the system continues to upgrade, the variety of goods will become richer. With these resources, the speed at which the master earns money will be faster, thus accelerating the promotion process."

With interest, Yan Ge opened the system and entered the store. The store had dozens of shelves, neatly arranged with goods in various categories. There were modern packaged seasonings, fruits, and vegetables, as well as traditional ceramic jars filled with pickles and fine wines. In terms of clothing, there were various styles from different eras, dazzling the eyes… The prices ranged from low to high, with some items costing a dozen coins, while others were priced at several hundred taels of silver.

Yan Ge browsed through some of the items, almost overwhelmed by the choices.

"Master, if you're looking for something specific, you can ask me, and I'll help you find it," Yan Jin said. Being one with the system, he knew the location of every item without searching.

Yan Ge remembered something. "Little Jin, see if there's a wine making recipe for me."

"Yes," Yan Jin responded without hesitation. In less than two seconds, several sheets of paper with writing appeared in the "Pre-Order Items" section. Below each item, in a rectangular box, there were descriptions of the taste, value, and price of the brewed wine. At the bottom, there was a prompt: "Are you sure you want to purchase this item?" with two options: Yes and No.

"Master, are you planning to open a winery?" Yan Jin asked.

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Yan Ge said, “Indeed. To earn money from women, one relies on clothing and jewelry, while for men, it’s undoubtedly through alcohol. This most expensive method costs only 1000 taels, which is a good deal. However, we must postpone the matter of brewing wine and first focus on opening the pharmacy.”

“A pharmacy?” Yan Jin asked.

Yan Ge smiled and replied, “Yes. The complete disappearance of the scar on my face is the best advertisement. I will take this opportunity to open a pharmacy.”

“That makes sense,” Yan Jin nodded.

Yan Ge asked Wan Xiang, “Why was Bai Jushen looking for me last time? Has it been resolved?”

Wan Xiang replied, “Master, Wen Xian heard that you were planning a major project in the outskirts of the capital and expressed interest in joining.”

***Wen Xian is the young master Yan Ge met at the toy shop during the poisoning incident. The one dubbed ‘First Merchant”.**

Yan Ge's lips curled up. It was really dozing off and being offered a pillow. He was worried about not having enough manpower, and now someone was offering their help. How fortunate!

"Master, now that you have returned to the company, shall I send a message to Wen Xian?" Xiao Chuanzi observed Yan Ge's expression and asked.

"No need. If Wen Xian truly cares about this matter, he will definitely arrange for someone to keep an eye on our company," Yan Ge replied.

His guess was right on the mark. Shortly after he sat down in his office, a servant came to report that Wen Xian had come to visit. He then had servant take him to the reception room.

Yan Ge straightened his clothes and walked towards the reception room, followed by Yan Jin. Others couldn't see Yan Jin, so he would sometimes walk, sometimes leap, and even fly around, amusing himself and having a happy time.

Yan Ge appeared at the entrance of the reception room, and Wen Xian stood up, bowing with a smile. "Young Master Qin, it's not easy to see you, as you haven't been to the company for quite some time."

The scar on Yan Ge's face had completely disappeared, and Wen Xian couldn't possibly miss that fact, so he looked surprised.

"Apologies for the delay, I had some urgent matters at home," Yan Ge said. "Please have a seat. May I know why Young Master Wen was looking for me in such a hurry? What can I do for you?"

Wen Xian said, "I've heard that Young Master Qin's project in the outskirts of the capital has attracted a lot of attention. I'm interested in joining."

Yan Ge asked, "How much capital are you planning to invest, Young Master Wen?"

Wen Xian smiled helplessly. He hadn't found out anything yet, and Yan Ge was already testing him. But the First Company had become synonymous

with “profit” nowadays, and he was certain that once he got involved in the outskirts project, making a fortune would be an easy task. So he answered Yan Ge’s question, “50,000 taels.”

Yan Ge shook his folding fan and said, “Young Master Wen is so straightforward, I can’t help but show sincerity as well. Recently, I have other matters to attend to and can’t spare time for the outskirts project. However, if I could find a collaborator, it would be much appreciated. I plan to establish an amusement park in the outskirts. If Young Master Wen is truly interested in joining, we each contribute 100,000 taels. After the amusement park is built, I will be responsible for developing new attractions, while you will handle management. The profits will be divided in a 40-60 ratio between us. What do you think, Young Master Wen?”

Wen Xian became intrigued and said, “An amusement park? It sounds intriguing. But I’m curious, what kind of attractions will it have?”

Yan Ge shook his head and replied, “To avoid leaking confidential information, I can’t reveal too much for now. I can only guarantee that it will be incredibly profitable. Young Master Wen, please take your time to consider. To be honest, even if you don’t participate, I am still looking for someone to join. So, Young Master Wen, I’m afraid you need to make a decision quickly.”

Wen Xian watched him calmly sipping tea, his heart trembling. He had only heard about Master Qin clean and decisive way of doing things, but today, during their negotiation, he truly realized that there was no room for bargaining with him.

“Young Master Qin will only be responsible for developing new projects, while I will handle the management, which is quite complicated. Despite that, I propose a 50-50 profit split. What do you think?”

Yan Ge shook his head strictly and said, “Young Master Wen, your words are misguided. Although the Wen family’s business is substantial, it has only remained stable in recent years without any breakthroughs. If you collaborate with First Company, the Wen family will gain much more from

First Company's reputation than First Company gains from the Wen family."

Wen Xian fell into silence.

Both Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi felt that their young master was too direct, and they were afraid that he might have touched a sensitive spot with Wen Xian and prepared themselves for a potential fallout.

Wen Xian sighed and smiled, "Young Master Qin is insightful, and I admire that. Let's go with your proposal. We will each invest 100,000 taels, and the profits will be split 40-60."

"Young Master Wen is straightforward indeed," Yan praised with a smile. "Wan Xiang, bring one of the four papers in the study."

"Yes," Wan Xiang acknowledged.

Yan Ge had already drafted the contract while in the carriage. At this moment, he could write without hesitation. His pen moved smoothly like flowing water as he quickly wrote three pages, finalizing the contract and handing it to Wen Xian for his review.

After carefully reading through it, Wen Xian nodded, "There are no issues. Young Master Qin, you have thoroughly considered all aspects."

"If there are no problems, I will have the contract printed in three copies. Once signed, it will be effective. One copy will be kept by the authorities, and the other two will be given to you and me, respectively."

Wen Qin nodded again.

On that day, Wen Xian had someone bring over 100,000 taels in silver bills, while Yan Ge took out 70,000 taels. He had already invested 30,000 taels in the initial stage, and with the account book at hand, everything was clear. He handed over the account book and the 70,000 taels to Wen Xian. After signing the contract, their collaboration was officially established.

Only then did Yan Ge present the project plan and design drawings of the amusement park, providing a detailed explanation to Wen Xian and entrusting him with the full authority to handle the amusement park affairs.

Wen Xian looked at the design drawings and secretly rejoiced that he hadn't hesitated in his decision.

With the amusement park matters delegated, Yan Ge felt at ease. He called Xiao Chuanzi to his side and asked, "Xiao Chuanzi, now that the Toy House project is on track, have you been idle and growing bored again?"

Xiao Chuanzi replied honestly, "Master, I have indeed been a little… hehe… Master, are you assigning me a new task?"

Yan Ge chuckled, "You are smart. Indeed, the scar on my face have already disappeared. Your task is to open a pharmacy and make the scar removal ointment the flagship product."

Xiao Chuanzi hesitated, "I'm not very knowledgeable about medicinal herbs…"

"I'm assigning you to manage the pharmacy, not to treat patients," Yan Ge clarified. "You'll be responsible for hiring four reputable doctors, and I'll also try to find a retired imperial physician to join us.

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Within two days, news of the scar on Young Master Qin's face completely disappearing spread throughout the capital city. People were curious to know what miraculous medicine Young Master Qin had used to eliminate such an unsightly scar.

Shortly after, they learned about the opening of the First Company's pharmacy. On the first day of its opening, Ping'an Pharmacy was crowded with customers, most of whom came to buy scar removal ointment. And as for the prescription for scar removal, it naturally came from the "Pharmacopeia."

However, on the day of the pharmacy's opening, Yan Ge did not attend. He was in the palace.

Huangfu Yuchen had finally arranged Yan Jin's identity. He became the biological son of Prime Minister Wen Jiang, so Yan Jin's name was also changed to Jiang Yanjin. Historical records from later generations stated that Prime Minister Wen was a trusted minister of the emperor and a close friend of Emperor Huangfu Yuchen. One day, he brought his son Jiang Yanjin to the palace. When the emperor saw Jiang Yanjin, he was greatly pleased and immediately announced his intention to adopt him as his godson. The following day, the emperor officially adopted Jiang Yanjin as his adopted son, conferring upon him the title of Prince Jin and recording it in the imperial register. For a while, Jiang Yanjin became the second most famous figure in the palace, following Yan Shiren.

Soon after, Huangfu Yuchen planned for the Crown Prince and Jiang Yanjin to meet.

On the day of their meeting, Jiang Yanjin couldn't help but reach out and pinch the Crown Prince's face. The Crown Prince, out of curiosity, also reached out to pinch his face.

The sight of the two face-to-face, pinching each other's faces, made Yan Ge burst into laughter for quite some time.

Jiang Yanjin was very fond of the Crown Prince. It was not easy for the Crown Prince to meet someone of his age in the palace, and Jiang Yanjin treated him well. How could the Crown Prince not develop a fondness for Jiang Yanjin? The two quickly became inseparable.

Because Jiang Yanjin was only the emperor's adopted son and had no possibility of inheriting the throne, it was advantageous for the Crown Prince to be close to him, as he was the son of Prime Minister Wen. Therefore, the Empress did not oppose the Crown Prince's contact with Jiang Yanjin, which saved Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen a lot of trouble.

However, the system had not yet reached its peak, and even if Jiang Yanjin could transform into human form, he couldn't stray too far from Yan Ge. At most, he could only be a mile away. So during the day, he mostly stayed with Yan Ge, and only spent time with the Crown Prince at night.

With these urgent matters resolved, Yan Ge finally had the time to sit down and calculate the company's accounts, growing more and more pleased as he did so. Wen Xian's participation had saved him a significant amount of money. With 200,000 taels, he finally had enough and didn't need to borrow from Huangfu Yuchen.

Less than an hour after leaving the palace, he had someone prepare a carriage to return.

Huangfu Yuchen was still attending the early morning court session when he heard Deng Mande report that Yan Ge had returned. He felt puzzled and went straight back to the Tenglong Palace after the court session.

"Yuchen." Yan Ge greeted him as soon as he saw him, his steps light as if there was a gust of wind beneath his feet. He leaned against Huangfu

Yuchen and kisses his face.

“Why are you so happy?” Huangfu Yuchen extended his arm and wrapped it around Yan Ge’s waist. Since being with Yan Ge, he had laughed countless times.

“Yan Jin pays his respects to Father Emperor.” Due to Deng Mande’s presence, Jiang Yanjin performed his salutations properly and respectfully. Yan Ge’s secret was too astonishing, and only Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen knew Jiang Yanjin’s true origin.

“No need for formalities.”

After Jiang Yanjin expressed his gratitude to Huangfu Yuchen, he obediently sat down on the side.

Jiang Yanjin was well-behaved and sensible, which made Deng Mande very fond of him. Deng Mande busily brought over a fruit tray and peeled a banana for him to eat.

Yan Ge grinned and took out a banknote worth 200,000 taels, looking smug. “Have you forgotten our initial agreement? Hehehe.”

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled, shielding Jiang Yanjin and Deng Mande from his view, and hugged him while giving him a kiss. “Rest assured, I haven’t forgotten. Deng Mande, prepare…”

—“Ding. Congratulations on successfully completing Main Mission 6—being conferred the title of Cairen by the emperor. Reward: 1,000 taels of silver, and ‘Fengyun Immortal Records’ with cultivating technique up to the Late Enlightenment stage. Main Mission 7—Get conferred the title of Guiren by the emperor. Reward: 5,000 taels of silver, ‘Fengyun Immortal Records’ cultivating technique up to the Late Harmonization stage. Failure to complete the mission will result in a deduction of 5,000 taels of silver. To accept the mission, choose ‘Yes.’ To decline the mission, choose ‘No.’”

*Ranks from the bottom -Daying, Changzai, Shirén (scholar), Cairen, Guiren, Shiqing, Caiqing (honorable official), Guiqing(Noble Consort), to

Huang Guiqing.

News of Yan Ge being conferred the title of Cairen spread throughout the harem. It didn’t take long for everyone to see him walking out of the Tenglong Palace with a smile on his face. They secretly ridiculed him, thinking that after following the emperor for so long, he finally gained his favor. What was there to be proud of?

***The ranks have levels. It was explained at the beginning, forgot which chapter though 😅. Anyway, he has now gone from a low level concubine to mid level.**

“Yuchen, I don’t plan on leaving the palace for the next few days.” Yan Ge winked at Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen understood that he wanted to cultivate. “Follow me.”

He took Yan Ge to the secret chamber inside the Tenglong Palace.

During this upgrade, Yan Ge received a jade scroll from the system. He immersed his spiritual power into it and imprinted the cultivation techniques of the “Fengyun Immortal Records” into his mind, reaching the later stage of the Illumination period. Before his eyes, a man sat cross-legged, guiding the spiritual energy of heaven and earth into his body. A white line flowed along his meridians.

“The Dao that can be spoken is not the eternal Dao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name. The Dao gives birth to one, one gives birth to two, two gives birth to three, and three gives birth to all things. All things carry yin and embrace yang. The Dao generates the primordial qi from emptiness, and from the primordial qi, yin and yang are produced. Yin and yang merge to form the three bodies, and the three bodies give birth to all things…”

Yan Ge sat cross-legged, with his five hearts facing the sky, expelling all distracting thoughts from his mind. He closed his eyes and focused, imagining that there was a stream of spiritual energy in the air, guiding it into his body through his palms, soles of feet, and crown. Before long, a faint and cool breath penetrated his skin, permeated his flesh and blood, and flowed into his meridians. He had previously studied acupuncture points and quickly guided the spiritual energy to flow through the correct

acupoints as shown in the diagram, ultimately gathering it in the Dantian. Then, he guided the spiritual energy from the Dantian to the brow, from the brow to the soles of the feet, back to the Dantian, and then flowing to the brow… repeating this cycle continuously.

As the true qi accumulated more and more within his body, the Dantian grew hotter. After eighty-one cycles, the true qi no longer required his deliberate control and began to circulate automatically. His previous internal energy was also refined and transformed into true qi. His whole body, from the inside out, felt warm and entered a state of selflessness.

Two days passed, and Yan Ge still hadn't left the secret chamber. Huangfu Yuchen knew little about cultivation and was extremely worried. He went in to check on him.

Yan Ge was sitting motionless, enveloped in white mist. Fortunately, his expression was calm, which relieved Huangfu Yuchen. He left the secret chamber and had Deng Mande prepare hot food at any time.

Deng Mande was unaware of the existence of the secret chamber, but he sensed something. However, since Huangfu Yuchen didn't mention it, it meant that he shouldn't know, so he wouldn't inquire. One of the first things to learn as a servant and subordinate is self-awareness.

After an unknown period of time, Yan Ge slowly opened his eyes in the secret chamber. The tiny specks of dust in the air seemed ten times larger, and he could see them clearly. He could even hear the conversations between Huangfu Yuchen and Deng Mande outside the secret chamber, as well as the sound of pouring tea. It felt strange to him, and he shook his head slightly, activating his true perception to suppress his heightened senses.

"Your Majesty, it's time for lunch."

"Prepare food for Yan Ge as well, but make it light."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Yan Ge pushed himself up with both hands and effortlessly leaped up, flying two or three meters into the air. He was filled with excitement and subconsciously wanted to test his strength, but then he remembered that he was still in the secret chamber. He quickly retracted his hands and opened the door, walking out.

“Yuchen, I don’t want to eat bland food, I want to eat meat.”

Huangfu Yuchen heard the sound, went up to him and hugged him, “No. You haven’t eaten for a few days, suddenly eating too greasy is not good for your health.”

“No.” Yan Ge leaned close to his ear and kissed his ear secretly, “You forgot that my body has been modified? Even if it’s overly greasy food, it can’t harm me, let alone minor illnesses or discomforts.”

“Alright.” Huangfu Yuchen said helplessly, “Freshen up first.”

After freshening up, Deng Mande voluntarily exited.

“I’m starving to death.” Yan Ge snatched Huangfu Yuchen’s bowl of rice, put two chopsticks of vegetables into the bowl, and ate with a spoon.

Seeing how hungry he was, Huangfu Yuchen felt both distressed and amused. He brought an empty bowl and filled it with rice, then added the dishes, dividing the meat and vegetables equally. After mixing them together, he pushed the bowl towards Yan Ge, then carefully removed the fish bones onto a plate.

Yan Ge ate while watching him, becoming increasingly satisfied. His eyes curved, and he couldn’t help but lean over and kiss his cheek.

Huangfu Yuchen wiped his face with a handkerchief in disgust. “It’s all greasy.”

Yan Ge picked up a piece of meat with his chopsticks and brought it close to Huangfu Yuchen’s mouth. “As an apology.”

Huangfu Yuchen opened his mouth and ate it, then put the fish meat into Yan Ge's bowl and continued removing bones. "You eat. I'm still not hungry."

Yan Ge had three bowls of rice in a row, and the burning sensation in his stomach subsided slightly. He slowed down his eating pace, urging Huangfu Yuchen to eat and occasionally arranging the dishes for him.

The attendants noticed Yan Ge's meticulousness, so they consciously avoided intruding on their intimate moments.

"Has your cultivation been going smoothly?" Huangfu Yuchen scooped a bowl of soup and handed it to him. "Have a few sips of soup before eating."

"Mm," Yan Ge nodded. "It's been smooth. The longer the duration of my first meditation, the better my aptitude. However, the secret room is not suitable for seclusion."

Huangfu Yuchen was puzzled. "Huangfu Yuchen was puzzled. "What's unsuitable about it? I can have it rebuilt."

"No," Yan Ge said. "Now I understand why legendary cultivators always practice in remote mountains. On one hand, there are fewer people and more abundant spiritual energy in the deep mountains. On the other hand, after emerging from seclusion, they can't resist testing their skills. A casual strike can cause considerable damage."

Huangfu Yuchen understood. "I see. In that case, we indeed need to find another place for seclusion. There is a suitable mountain called Mingxia in the outskirts of the capital. Although Mingxia Mountain boasts beautiful scenery, its terrain is treacherous, with towering cliffs, and it is rarely visited by people. It's not far from the palace, and with our light skills, we can reach it in the time it takes to burn incense. We can build a secret room there."

Yan Ge said, "To avoid leaks, only the two of us can personally handle it."

“It’s not difficult. We can use explosives,” Huangfu Yuchen suggested. “But my identity doesn’t allow me to be away for too long, so the cultivation speed might not be very fast.”

Yan Ge explained, “Only the first cultivation at each level and when approaching a breakthrough will take a longer time and needs several days of meditation. Other times, cultivation only requires daily meditation, and one can wake up at any time. I will guide you when the time comes.”

That night, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen quietly left the palace and arrived at Mingxia Mountain. They used explosives to blast a cave, around 100 meters in size, beneath a cliff halfway up the mountain. The dense forest at the entrance perfectly concealed the existence of the cave.

Yan Ge had his own set of techniques for cultivation, and this time he was of great help in establishing the secret room. He set up a simple illusion array at the entrance to prevent anyone from inadvertently entering. From now on, this cave would be their secret place for cultivation, known only to the three of them.

–“Master, let’s test your current strength,” Yan Jin suggested.

Huangfu Yuchen was also interested.

Yan Ge nodded and said, “Very well.”

He mobilized the true qi in his dantian, quickly gathering it in the palms of his hands. With a low shout, he pushed his palm towards the cave wall. With a rumble, the ground trembled slightly, the rocks on the cave wall shattered, and dust filled the air. After the dust settled, everyone saw a large hole in the cave wall big enough for two children to crawl into.

Yan Ge once again mobilized and circulated his true qi. A strand of wind whirled around his fingertips. With a wave of his hand, a gust of wind shot out, sweeping towards a pile of rubble. The gust of wind was as sharp as a blade, slicing the rocks in half with a smooth and mirror-like surface.

Huangfu Yuchen praised, “The ‘Fengyun Immortal Record’ is truly marvelous!”

“Of course,” Yan Jin said proudly, “the one I presented naturally wouldn’t be inferior.” Whether it was because he was accustomed to acting like a child in front of the Crown Prince or for some other reason, he was becoming more and more childlike himself.

“Yuchen, you should also learn the Flowing Sands Sword Technique as soon as possible, or else you’ll be left even further behind,” Yan Ge teased Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen hugged his waist and said helplessly, “Don’t get too complacent. Maybe my aptitude will be even better than yours. Shall we go back?”

“Let’s go.”

Huangfu Yuchen tapped his foot and flew up the cliff with Yan Ge in tow. Yan Ge followed effortlessly, displaying the same agility.

MCUS Chapter 70

In the blink of an eye, it was the joyous day for Yan Su's marriage ceremony. The entrance of the Yan Mansion was adorned with colorful lights and decorations, and the sound of firecrackers filled the air. The joyous atmosphere was bustling with guests coming and going.

The Ministry of Rites, responsible for the five ceremonial occasions of auspiciousness, joy, military, guests, and funeral, typically played a minor role in managing national school affairs, imperial examinations, and foreign affairs with vassals and other countries.

Their significance was considered the lowest among the six ministries, but Yan Xiaojing, the Minister of Rites, had recently seen a series of promotions for his second son, and he was the most frequently promoted among the new consorts. He was now elevated to the status of Cairen and it was no secret that Yan Ge was highly favored by the emperor. Officials from both within and outside the court would not miss this opportunity to please Yan Xiaojing and arrived at the Yan Mansion with generous gifts.

At the entrance of the Yan Mansion, Yan Xiaojing and Butler Yan Fu were constantly exchanging pleasantries with various dignitaries, instructing the servants to note down the gifts meticulously, busy to the point of being overwhelmed. The higher Yan Ge's status was in the palace, the less Yan Xiaojing dared to relax his demands on his family, including himself. Among all the officials who came to congratulate, those with a lower rank than his own were allowed to give ten taels of silver as a gift, while those of equal or higher rank were to give fifty taels of silver. Not a single bit more. Some officials lacked tact and insisted on giving more, which required Yan Xiaojing to spend some effort to dissuade them. He couldn't offend them on such a joyous occasion.

The guests had already heard that Yan Cairen might personally come to congratulate Yan Su, so they didn't dare to make things difficult for Yan Xiaojing. In short, the atmosphere was relatively harmonious.

For the elder brother's grand wedding, Yan Ge could only attend as a palace consort to make it formal, and he had to have the Ministry of Rites arrange an escort for him. Yan Jin also dressed up and accompanied him.

Originally, Huangfu Yuchen wanted to come with them, but Yan Ge had to persuade him with flattering words. If Huangfu Yuchen really came with him, the Yan family would immediately become the center of attention.

The escort team arrived on time before the ceremony began.

"Prince Jin arrives – Yan Cairen arrives –"

Everyone stood up to welcome both the prince and Yan Cairen.

"Greeting to Prince Jin, greetings to Yan Cairen."

Yan Ge held Yan Jin's hand as they stepped down from the sedan chair and said, "No need for formalities, everyone."

"Thank you, Prince Jin. Thank you, Yan Cairen."

After everyone stood up, they dared to steal glances at Yan Ge and Prince Jin. Prince Jin was dressed like a golden boy, handsome and adorable, while Yan Jin had a mask on his face, just like he did during the emperor's birthday banquet. The distinguished appearance of the empror's consort was not something ordinary commoners could see, even for a male consort. But actually, Yan Ge just couldn't reveal that he was the "Young Master Qin."

Yan Jin ran to Minister Jiang Gan's side, held his hand, and looked at him with a beaming smile, saying, "Father."

"Ah," Jiang Gan patted his head. Although this little guy was not his biological son, he was lively and sensible, and Jiang Gan liked him very much.

Yan Ge approached Yan Xiaojing and Madam Yan and paid his respects to them.

“This son pays respects to Father and Mother.”

“No need for such formalities, Yan Cairen,” Yan Xiaojing stopped him in time.

Yan Ge then looked at Yan Su and smiled, “Congratulations, big brother!”

Yan Su cupped his hands and replied, “Thank you, Yan Cairen.”

Yan Ge didn’t like the idea of the whole family having to go through this formal exchange of greetings. He smiled and said, “Let’s talk inside.”

“Please, please.”

Inside the main hall, Yan Xiaojing and Madam Yan took their seats at the head, while Yan Ge sat on the side. The guests surrounded them, smiling and watching the newlyweds.

Huangfu Yuchen had also arrived, dressed in white, and was standing among the crowd. Yan Ge recognized him with just one glance, and they exchanged a meaningful look.

A loud cry of “the auspicious moment has arrived!” was heard, followed by the sound of firecrackers. As the sound faded, the master of ceremonies began to shout, “Kneel and pay respects to heaven and earth—”

Yan Su, wearing a large red flower on his chest, and the bride in her auspicious red attire knelt together, paying respects to the hall outside.

“Kowtow to the parents—”

“Husband and wife exchange bows—”

“Lead to the bridal chamber—”

Cheers and firecrackers erupted simultaneously as the bride and groom drank the ceremonial wine and the bride ate the dumplings, completing the rituals.

Yan Su was pulled away by a group of young masters to drink. Laughter filled the banquet, making it lively. Yan Su had undoubtedly sought advice from experienced individuals beforehand and had invited several friends and colleagues to help him handle the toasts. However, despite his preparations, he still ended up drunk, being supported by the crowd as they led him towards the bridal chamber, ready to play the traditional wedding pranks.

Yan Ge, with great interest, took Qiuju and the newly arrived little eunuch Xiao Fuzi to join in the excitement.

“Young Master, you have a noble status, what if someone offends you?” Xiao Fuzi advised tactfully.

“Let’s be careful, and everything will be fine. It’s rare to have the opportunity to witness such festivities.”

Qiuju hesitated and whispered, “Young Master, the emperor is still waiting for you to return together.”

“Go and tell him to wait a little longer. I’ll go to him soon.”

Qiuju had no choice but to go find Huangfu Yuchen.

Yan Ge led Xiao Fuzi and followed the crowd to the backyard, keeping a distance to prevent others from being too concerned about his identity.

Unexpectedly, at that moment, two dark figures suddenly descended from the sky, swords raised, aiming at Yan Ge!

The two sword lights, like sharp arrows, flashed through the darkness.

“Master!” Xiao Fuzi exclaimed in alarm, rushing forward and using his body to block Yan Ge.

Yan Ge was startled but quickly grew furious. Today was supposed to be a solemn and joyous day, but if blood were to be shed, wouldn't it be a curse on the occasion?

With a cold snort, he pushed Xiao Fuzi aside with his left hand and swiftly shot out two bursts of true qi with his right hand, striking the wrists of the two black-clothed men. These men exuded a strong murderous intent, and Yan Ge concluded that they were assassins. Without mercy, he delivered a palm strike with each hand.

Xiao Fuzi, lying on the ground, quickly regained his senses and, without caring to get up, shouted loudly, "Assassins! Capture the assassins!"

One of the black-clothed men pulled out a hidden weapon and shot it.

Yan Ge's figure flashed, appearing instantly in front of Xiao Fuzi. With a swing of his right hand, he deftly deflected the iron caltrop that he had casually broken off from a bamboo twig, and as if playing golf, hit the knee of the black-clothed man.

"Ah!"

Xiao Fuzi continued to shout, "Capture the assassins!"

The guards of the Yan Mansion were quickly alerted and came running upon hearing the commotion.

A white figure swiftly passed before everyone's eyes, appearing first in the backyard and launching a surprise attack on the two black-clothed men from behind.

The two black-clothed men turned to flee.

"You've arrived?" Yan Ge greeted Huangfu Yuchen with ease. Like an ethereal shadow, he swiftly passed through the gap between the two black-clothed men, spreading his arms and striking their backs simultaneously with both palms. In the next instant, he was calmly standing by Huangfu Yuchen's side.

Huangfu Yuchen embraced his waist and angrily ordered, “Capture them for Us!”

Several hidden guards materialized out of thin air, subduing the two black-clothed men.

The faces of the two black-clothed men turned pale, and they exchanged a glance before a trace of blood suddenly trickled from the corners of their mouths. They had actually chosen to commit suicide!

In the end, blood was shed at Yan Su’s wedding, and Yan Ge’s face darkened.

Huangfu Yuchen’s expression also turned grim.

Only now did the others react. This unfamiliar man turned out to be the emperor in disguise. They quickly knelt down, “We pay our respects to the Emperor! Long live the Emperor!”

“Investigate this for Us! We want to know who dared to hire assassins to target Us!” Huangfu Yuchen couldn’t contain his anger.

Yan Ge patted his chest and said, “Alright, getting angry with others is just tormenting oneself. Don’t be angry anymore. The fox will reveal its tail sooner or later.”

“Next time, you should still bring guards when you go out,” Huangfu Yuchen said with a stern face.

“Understood, let’s consider these assassins as a test of our skills. It’s just unfortunate that they caused bloodshed at my brother’s wedding.”

The crowd lowered their heads, their faces showing astonishment. Yan Cairen actually spoke to the emperor in such a casual manner, and the emperor didn’t even hold him accountable.

In an inconspicuous corner, there was another person with a gloomy expression—Ning Chaobang. At this moment, he stared at Yan Ge with a serious face, devoid of his usual amiable demeanor.

“I didn’t expect him to possess martial arts skills. Fortunately, we hired assassins, so there’s no risk of tracing it back to me. It’s just a pity to miss such a good opportunity…”

Back in the palace, Huangfu Yuchen still wore a somber expression.

“Still angry?” Yan Ge loosened his belt, dissipating the summer heat.

After instructing the palace maid to prepare an ice basin, Huangfu Yuchen said, “The person behind these assassins is extremely cautious, actually hiring killers to target you. His identity must be extraordinary.”

Yan Ge nodded in agreement.

Helplessly, Huangfu Yuchen said, “Are you still laughing? Although your martial arts skills are impressive, it’s difficult to guard against hidden arrows.”

Yan Ge protested, “I wasn’t laughing.”

Huangfu Yuchen reached out and pinched his face, then touched the corners of his mouth before solemnly nodding, “Indeed, you weren’t laughing. I misjudged.”

Suddenly, Yan Ge pounced on him, using him as a cushion. “Don’t worry too much. We are prepared now, and if he dares to make another move, we’ll surely catch him by the tail.”

Huangfu Yuchen shook his head. “The other party is very cautious. Until we have a foolproof plan, they won’t easily act. Anyway, listen to me. From now on, when you walk outside the palace, you must be extra careful and not act recklessly.”

“As you command. Let’s go and bathe.”

MCUS Chapter 71

After finishing their evening meal, Yan Ge wiped his mouth and said, “Yuchen, how is your Flowing Sands sword technique coming along?”

“Shall We demonstrate it?” Huangfu Yuchen asked with a smile.

Before Yan Ge could respond, Yan Jin swiftly swallowed the food in his mouth and spoke first, “I support it.”

Observing Huangfu Yuchen’s confident demeanor, Yan Ge’s competitive spirit arose. “Okay, demonstrate it then.”

The group arrived in the courtyard, dismissing anyone unrelated to the matter.

The Flowing Sands sword technique was extremely powerful, so Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen each took a wooden sword.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “You attack first.”

Yan Ge gritted his teeth. This guy was so confident? Not one to be polite with Huangfu Yuchen, he launched an attack first. Since it was a demonstration and not a friendly exchange, it was time to show his true skills.

He executed a deadly strike, slashing across Huangfu Yuchen’s waist with a flash of sword light. Huangfu Yuchen remained calm and composed, lightly leaping into the air. His feet seemed to tread upon invisible steps as he gracefully evaded the strike, swiftly retaliating with a sword swing aimed at Yan Ge’s vulnerable neck.

Yan Ge’s body, enhanced by Foundation Building Pill, was remarkably flexible and astonishingly supple. He abruptly bent his waist, folding his upper and lower body almost in half.

Huangfu Yuchen’s sword aura narrowly grazed past, and he suddenly smiled with an ambiguous meaning, his gaze lingering on Yan Ge’s waist for a while.

“Why are you laughing? Be serious,” Yan Ge felt annoyed by his laughter.

Huangfu Yuchen transmitted his inner strength in secret, saying, “Your waist is quite flexible.”

Yan Ge’s true qi stagnated, the breath in his chest stagnated, and he coughed, “You…,” he lifted his sword to launch another attack on Huangfu Yuchen, feeling enraged and embarrassed.

Huangfu Yuchen smirked inwardly but didn’t dare to be careless. He swiftly retreated three steps, pushing forward with his left palm while holding his sword with his right hand, earnestly engaging in the duel. In the blink of an eye, the two of them exchanged several moves, deconstructing eight or nine forms.

The surrounding flowers, plants, and trees were swept away by their sword aura, scattering in the air. Yan Jin and Deng Mande quickly moved far away, watching with great interest.

After exchanging over two or three hundred moves, neither of them emerged as the clear victor. The Flowing Sands sword technique, employed by Huangfu Yuchen, emphasized ethereal agility and carried a dominating presence, making it even more formidable. Without using his true essence, Yan Ge could barely hold his own, becoming exhausted in the process.

“Let’s stop, let’s stop.” Yan Ge used his wooden sword as a support and focused on catching his breath. “You’ve learned it much faster than I did initially.”

Huangfu Yuchen walked over and embraced him. “It’s because of your foundation.”

Yan Ge nodded in agreement. It wasn’t an inaccurate assessment. When he first learned the Flowing Sands sword technique, he had no martial skills whatsoever. His current achievements were already quite astonishing.

“We can start preparing for Foundation Building.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “I’ve made arrangements in advance.”

The next day, Huangfu Yuchen feigned illness, declaring that he wouldn’t attend court for the next few days.

“Your Majesty…” Deng Mande hesitated to speak. Having accompanied Huangfu Yuchen to the small house where Yan Ge was found, he was aware of the changes in Yan Ge’s body. Some things couldn’t be hidden.

Huangfu Yuchen stated without a doubt, “Deng Mande, Yan Cairen is someone I entrust with my life. Treat him with the same loyalty as you would me.”

Understanding that the Emperor was serious, Deng Mande straightened his posture and knelt down on both knees with a resounding thud. “Yes! I, your humble servant, swear my loyalty to both Your Majesty and Yan Cairen, with unwavering devotion!”

Yan Ge smiled and said, “Eunuch Deng, please rise. Trust me, I won’t harm Yuchen. Please remain here as well. I may need your assistance later.”

“Yes,” Deng Mande stood up and stood aside.

Yan Ge helped Huangfu Yuchen lie down on the bed and fed him a Foundation Building Pill. He held his right hand and said, “I will be here with you all the way.”

In the next moment, his hand was suddenly clenched and then released in an instant.

Huangfu Yuchen looked apologetically at him, exerting all his strength to resist the pain. In just a short while, his face was covered in sweat. The self-control of an emperor was extraordinary. Huangfu Yuchen lay there, motionless except for the sweat on his face. There was a slight twitch of his muscles, and bulging veins on his arm, unlike Yan Ge, who was rolling on the ground and crying out in pain.

Yan Ge felt distressed and whispered, “Yuchen, it’s fine to make some noise. There’s no one else here.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s weak smile was particularly fragile, and his lips turned pale. “It’s fine, I can endure.”

Yan Ge could only stop trying to dissuade him and hold his hand tightly, accompanying him all the way.

Yan Jin couldn’t be of much help here, and he could tell that Huangfu Yuchen’s aptitude was definitely not a problem. He tugged at Yan Ge’s sleeve and said, “I want to go out and play.”

“Go ahead,” Yan Ge replied.

Yan Jin beckoned Qiuju and headed towards the Empress’s Yongyi Palace.

Upon learning of Yan Jin’s arrival, the Empress asked him to come in with mixed emotions. Since the Crown Prince and Yan Jin were together, not only had he become more diligent in his studies but also more sensible, which made the Empress extremely gratified and proud. However, who in the palace didn’t know that Prince Yan and Yan Cairen were so close? The closer the Crown Prince got to Yan Jin, the closer it was to Yan Cairen in her eyes. Yan Cairen was a male consort, and the Emperor’s favoritism towards him felt like a slap in the face.

“Prince Yan, please rise,” the Empress said.

“Thank you, Empress,” Yan Jin asked directly, “Empress, is the Crown Prince here?”

The Empress replied, “The Crown Prince is studying in the study. In other words, Prince Yan, you should leave.”

Yan Jin smiled and said, “I will accompany him in his studies.”

Without waiting for the Empress to object, he walked towards the Crown Prince’s study.

The Empress sat on the cool jade bed, watching his figure disappear, and her face turned cold.

The court ladies could read her expression and patted her back, comforting her, “Empress, please forgive this servant for speaking out of turn. Prince Yan is only the Emperor’s adopted son, and he won’t threaten the Crown Prince’s position. Moreover, Prince Yan has Prime Minister Wen behind him. It’s only beneficial for the Crown Prince to be close to him, with no harm. Why not ease your mind, Empress?”

The Empress remained silent for a long time before sighing softly, “You’re right. I should be more open-minded.”

As soon as Yan Jin entered the Crown Prince’s study, he saw him sitting at the desk, engrossed in a book.

“Crown Prince.”

The young Crown Prince looked up, jumping off the chair with joy. “Brother Yan, you’re here.”

Yan Jin playfully pinched his face and asked, “Have you finished today’s lessons?”

“I’m almost done. I still need to practice five pieces of calligraphy with a brush and five pieces with a pen,” the young Crown Prince replied crisply.

Yan Jin nodded and pinched his soft face again. “I’ll accompany you in your studies, and after we finish, we’ll go out to play.”

“Okay.”

The eunuchs and palace maids on the side watched the two children speak in a serious manner, secretly smiling.

Inside the Tenglong Palace, Huangfu Yuchen was still undergoing the transformation of the Foundation Building Pill. Until late at night, he finally passed out, and was just as filthy as Yan Ge was initially. Yan Ge personally helped him bathe and changed into clean clothes.

After five days, Huangfu Yuchen finally woke up. His height and body hadn't changed, but his muscles were filled with strength and explosiveness. His facial features became more profound, and he became even more handsome. Yan Ge couldn't help but feel his heart race when he looked into his deep eyes.

"Great, Yuchen, now you can start cultivating. Let me teach you—"

Before he could finish speaking, Huangfu Yuchen sealed his mouth with a kiss. Huangfu Yuchen teased him for a moment, and Yan Ge was conquered. Huangfu Yuchen's more powerful attack and hotter emotions left him powerless to resist, and he had no intention of resisting. He wrapped his hands around the man's neck…

Hearing the commotion, Deng Mande ran in with excitement but saw the bed curtains swaying. Embarrassed, he quickly retreated and ordered the young eunuchs, "Prepare hot water immediately and serve the Emperor and Yan Cairen for a bath."

"Yes."

It took a full hour for Huangfu Yuchen to pull back the bed curtains, holding the person wrapped in a blanket in his arms, a satisfied smile on his lips.

After Yan Ge bathed and changed into clean clothes, he placed him back on the bed. Huangfu Yuchen then attended to himself, closing his eyes and soaking in the bath, asking Deng Mande, "Has the court been relatively calm these past few days?"

Deng Mande replied, “Your Majesty, there haven’t been any major events. However, the ministers have grown somewhat perplexed as Your Majesty hasn’t appeared in public for several days. Also, the Empress visited the Tenglong Palace once, and Yan Cairen went out to attend to her. The Empress Dowager seemed displeased when she left, but she didn’t say anything.”

“The matter I ordered an investigation on last time, is there no progress yet?” Huangfu Yuchen asked, displeased.

“There has been no further news since then,” Deng Mande replied. “It seems the other party has also become cautious.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Arrange for me to attend the court half an hour from now.”

“Yes.”

The officials waited in the Hall for a while until Huangfu Yuchen arrived, slightly late.

“Thank you, esteemed ministers, for waiting.”

“We dare not.”

The officials saw Huangfu Yuchen’s radiant expression, improved complexion, and increased aura of dominance, and their doubts about his absence from court vanished.

After showing himself to the ministers, Huangfu Yuchen appointed Prime Minister Wen, and Martial Minister Wu, to temporarily handle state affairs in his stead. Together with Yan Ge, he went to Mingxia Mountain. His time for assimilating the Foundation Building Pill was similar to Yan Ge’s, which meant that their aptitude for cultivation was on par. This reassured Huangfu Yuchen, as he no longer had to worry about being left too far behind by Yan Ge.

Once inside the stone cave, Yan Ge affixed the pre-drawn acupoint diagram to the cave wall, sat cross-legged, and said to Huangfu Yuchen, “Sit down like me and follow my lead, you must not be hasty, or else it’s easy to lose control.”

“Rest assured,” Huangfu Yuchen crouched down, gently brushing his lips against Yan Ge’s before sitting opposite him with determination.

“Center your Qi in your lower dantian, guide it from the tailbone acupoint, through the sea of Qi, the gate of life… to the center of your brow, then return… repeat this cycle…”

Only when Huangfu Yuchen entered a state of deep meditation did Yan Ge relax and stay with him for a while longer. He then deactivated the illusionary formation, and left the mountain cave.

MCUS Chapter 72

The genius of dawn broke through the narrow alley, revealing a small grocery store. A drowsy shopkeeper named Ah San yawned as he opened the door, sluggishly fastening his belt. Suddenly, he spotted an acquaintance passing by with great vigor.

He quickly called out, “Hey, Douzi, why are you dressed so neatly early in the morning? Going to visit your wife?”

“I’m off to work,” replied the young man known as Douzi, tugging at his new clothes with a beaming smile.

“Work?” Ah San, curious about Douzi’s joyous demeanor, asked, “Why are you so happy? Did you find a good job?”

Douzi, full of pride, exclaimed, “It’s indeed a great job! Have you heard of the Imperial City Amusement Park in the outskirts of the capital? It opens today, and I’m working there.”

“The Imperial City Amusement Park?” Ah San suddenly became alert. His hands loosened, and unbeknownst to him, his pants dropped to his ankles. “That’s the place operated by ‘Nan Yi’! You’re incredibly lucky. How much will you earn per month?”

“Two taels!” Douzi proudly extended two fingers, but before he could finish speaking, he had already walked far away. “Brother San, I’m in a hurry to go to work. We’ll chat next time!”

“Two taels…” Ah San was dumbfounded. That was much more than what his small grocery store could earn in a month. Even earning 600 coins per month was considered remarkable.

“Bang! Bang! Bang!”

The deafening sound of firecrackers echoed from the first hour of Mao until the second quarter, even reaching the ministers waiting inside the palace, who whispered among themselves.

“What’s that sound?”

“Do you know about the ‘Imperial City Amusement Park’ in the outskirts? It opens today. I heard they have many attractions for children. My son is taking my grandson there to play.”

“How could we not know? They’ve been distributing those colorful ‘promotional flyers’ everywhere for the past few days. As soon as the kids see them, they clamor to go. I’m also planning to take my child there for some fun.”

…..

Huangfu Yu Chen listened from the side door, smiled at the person still asleep in bed and gestured to Deng Mande.

“The Emperor has arrived!”

All the ministers knelt.

“Long live the Emperor!”

“Rise, my ministers.” Huangfu Yuchen took his seat on the dragon throne. “If there is any matter to report, do so. Otherwise, you may leave.”

The ministers were uncertain, their minds preoccupied with thoughts of the amusement park. These ministers, who had risen to the level of being eligible to attend the court, were not young anymore. They either had young children or grandchildren. The amusement park’s promotion was well done, with almost every street adorned with colorful flyers. Even if they hadn’t been out recently, the servants responsible for household errands or the stewards could bring back a few flyers. It was said that on the opening day

of the amusement park, there would be a lucky draw. They all wanted to take their little ones there, even if just to join in the excitement.

Huangfu Yuchen rose and left.

Once Deng Mande called for the court’s adjournment, the ministers couldn’t wait to leave.

Huangfu Yuchen returned to the Tenglong Palace, where Yan Jin and the young crown prince anxiously sat on the crystal couch, occasionally casting glances at the draped dragon bed, fidgeting.

A palace maid softly reported to Huangfu Yuchen, “Reporting to Your Majesty, Yan Cairen is still sleeping.”

“Father Emperor,” Yan Jin, who wad braver than the young crown prince, approached Huangfu Yuchen. “Please wake Second Master. He promised to take us to the amusement park today.” He didn’t mind acting like a child, especially since Second Master’s invented games were truly enjoyable.

The young crown prince also looked at Huangfu Yuchen eagerly. “Yes, Father Emperor.”

Huangfu Yuchen cast a casual glance at them and walked towards the dragon bed. “Why the rush? You two have VIP tickets. Even if you go late, you’ll get to play before others.”

Yan Jin and the young crown prince could only sit back silently, dejectedly leaning on the table, their faces reflecting disappointment.

Huangfu Yuchen lifted the bed curtains, revealing Yan Ge who was lying on the bed. It was unknown how long he had been awake, and was resting his chin on his hands and smiling as he looked at him.

Huangfu Yuchen raised an eyebrow.

Suppressing a smile, Yan Ge leaned in close to his ear and whispered, “I’m deliberately teasing them.”

“It’s also a way to cultivate their patience,” Huangfu Yuchen smirked, leaning in to kiss him.

Unlike the young crown prince, Yan Jin had sharp ears and intentionally overheard their conversation. He ran over and stared at the two of them.

Huangfu Yuchen had no choice but to separate from Yan Ge.

“You’re finally awake!” the young crown prince trotted over, his face full of excitement.

Yan Ge sat up, stretched lazily, and pinched the small faces of the two boys. “Crown Prince, do you remember our agreement?”

The young crown prince’s expression became serious. “I remember. We can play happily when it’s time to play, but we must be focused and diligent when it’s time to study. This Crown Prince keeps his word.”

Huangfu Yuchen smirked.

“Good, we’ll leave after I freshen up.” After a month of preparation, the Imperial City Amusement Park was finally opening. Naturally, they wanted to take their own children there for some fun.

“I’ll go change clothes.” Huangfu Yuchen kissed Yan Ge’s lips and walked behind the screen.

Amidst the watchful gazes of Yan Jin and the young crown prince, Yan Ge shook his head inwardly, hastening his washing routine. After tidying up, he took out two identical backpacks from the wardrobe. He opened them to check the contents: water pouches, snacks, a small pouch with a few coins, and a set of spare clothes. The backpacks were sky blue, embroidered with majestic yellow tigers. Yan Jin and the young crown prince happily gathered around.

Yan Ge helped the two boys put on their backpacks and secretly instructed Yan Jin, “Remember to use illusion magic to change the appearances of yourself, the young crown prince, and Eunuch Deng when we go out.”

“Master, rest assured.”

Once everything was prepared, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen each held one child and walked out. Deng Mande changed into casual attire and followed behind. In addition, there were four visible guards, not to mention the concealed secret guards.

The young Crown Prince glanced at Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge, his face beaming with joy. Since getting to know Yang Cairen, he had become much happier. Emperor Father not only held his hand but also occasionally carried him.

A discreet carriage steadily made its way towards the palace gate.

The entrance of the amusement park, “Imperial City Amusement Park,” was written in gold, red, green, blue, and yellow letters. Below, the “Nan Yi” logo was particularly prominent.

Colorful flags fluttered on the gate pillars, and outside the gate, it was packed with people—men bringing their children to play, forming long queues at the entrance. Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were not surprised to see familiar faces inside. Some were Yan Ge’s business acquaintances, while others were high-ranking officials from the court.

Outside the specially erected barriers, vendors shouted loudly, “Melon seeds, delicious melon seeds!”

“Roasted sweet potatoes, fragrant roasted sweet potatoes!”

“Come and see, come and see, interesting clay figurines!”

“Cool and sweet green bean soup!”

“There are so many people in line, we’ll have to wait a long time,” the young crown prince said disappointedly.

Yan Jin comforted him, saying, “Don’t worry, we have VIP cards.”

Since there were too many people, the carriage couldn’t get close. Yan Ge instructed the coachman to park the carriage to the side. He and Huangfu Yuchen carried rhe two little ones, their unique backpacks immediately attracting the attention of many children. With their heads held high under the envious gazes of the crowd, the young crown prince and Yan Jin followed Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen towards the VIP entrance.

“Young Master Qin!” Kang Jian, accompanied by his son, was also in line. When he saw Yan Ge walking over, he immediately had a delighted expression. Ever since the unsuccessful attempt to introduce his sister to Yan Ge, Yan Ge had been somewhat distant towards him, and he had been looking for an opportunity to reconnect with Yan Ge.

“It’s Young Master Kang,” Yan Ge nodded in acknowledgment, offering a slight smile.

Kang Jian smiled and said, “Young Master Qin, congratulations on the opening of your amusement park. I have been intending to cooperate with your First Company—”

Yan Ge raised his hand to interrupt him, smiling apologetically, “I’m sorry, Young Master Kang. Today, I’m here with my family to have fun. Let’s not talk about business, Young Master. We’ll discuss it another day.”

With that, he took out a token and signaled to a staff member. “Young Master Kang is my friend. Let him enter from here.”

“Yes, Young Master Qin.”

Yan Ge nodded to Kang Jian and had the young crown prince and Yan Jin hand their tickets to the staff member for stamping, then the four of them entered together.

Kang Jian stood in place for a while before finally leading his son inside.

The tables and chairs within the amusement park were all meticulously crafted round logs, polished to a mirror-like smoothness and dyed in a kaleidoscope of colors, exuding a charming childlike quality. The park was

even livelier than the outside, with a row of shops selling fruits, snacks, drinks, toys… everything one could desire, including a branch of the Intellectual Toys House. The vendors who set up their shops inside the amusement park had to pay a substantial fee, but their earnings far exceeded this expense.

Laughter and joyful voices filled the air as the young crown prince and Yan Jin's attentive gaze swept across the carousel, slide, swing, Ferris wheel, and pirate ship etc, unable to decide what to play on.

Huangfu Yuchen's face showed a rare shocked expression, while Yan Ge couldn't help but chuckle, playfully patting him on the bottom.

"How does the carousel work?" Huangfu Yuchen looked at the carousel. Various colored wooden horses carried children who were smiling so hard.

Yan Ge explained, "Most of the attractions have a hidden chamber underground, operated entirely by manpower."

"How do the workers below know when to start and stop?" Huangfu Yuchen was quite curious.

Yan Ge smiled mischievously. "Do you see that upright iron pillar over there? The staff members above would strike it once, and upon receiving the signal, the workers below would start operating the mechanism. It stops after ten rotations. One ticket allows you to ride for ten rotations."

"I see."

"Father, Papa!" The young crown prince, who was excitedly watching other children play, pointed at a high platform. "I want to play on that first!" To make things easier, Huangfu Yuchen and the young crown prince had agreed to refer to Huangfu Yuchen as Father and Yan Ge as Papa. Yan Ge gave him a stern look at the time, but he did not object.

Huangfu Yuchen patted the young crown prince's head approvingly. "You're so brave! Let's go."

Both the young crown prince and Yan Jin were fearless and chose to play on the attractions that tested their bravery, laughing heartily. The guards kept a watchful eye on them, not daring to be the slightest bit distracted.

Huangfu Yuchen pulled Yan Ge under a parasol. “Are you thirsty?”

“I’m not thirsty. These two little ones dare to play anything. Bungee jumping is actually prepared for older children,” Yan Ge shook his head slightly.

Huangfu Yuchen gazed at him, smiling without saying a word.

Yan Ge was puzzled. “What’s the matter?”

Huangfu Yuchen embraced his waist. “Yunxi is lucky to have met you.”

“Aren’t you lucky?” Yan Ge raised his chin, the way his lips curled up at the corners was a fatal temptation to Huangfu Yuchen.

“I’m luckier than him.” Huangfu Yuchen chuckled softly, leaning closer to nuzzle his ear with his lips.

Wen Xian observed from a distance for a while, wiping the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief, shaking his head as he fanned himself with a folding fan, and calmly walked over.

“Young Master Qin, I feel like I’ve been deceived. You’re here enjoying the cool breeze while I’m sweating over there.”

Yan Ge laughed. “Boss Wen, it’s too late for regrets.”

“I don’t know who this is?” Wen Xian bowed to Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen playfully glanced at Yan Ge.

Yan Ge held onto Huangfu Yuchen’s waist, giving a concise answer. “I am his husband.”

Huangfu Yuchen gave him a sidelong glance, his eyes filled with indulgent laughter, and he greeted Wen Xian with a cupped fist. “Huang Chenyu. Master Wen, our family owes you a lot for taking care of our Qin.”

MCUS Chapter 73

“Master Huang, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” Wen Xian said. “I dare not take credit for your care, Young Master Qin.”

Yan Ge asked, “I recall you hired several managers. Why did you come personally?”

Wen Xian explained, “There are too many guests today, and I was worried that some departments might overlook things on their first day of work, so I came to check.”

“Father, Papa!” Yan Jin ran over with the young crown prince, both of them sweating profusely. “Little Yunxi said he’s thirsty and wants to drink juice.”

The two children looked intelligent and lively, which made Wen Xian somewhat envious.

“Very well,” Yan Ge said. “You have some change in your backpacks, so you can buy it yourselves later.”

Wen Xian caught a glimpse of Bai Jushen’s figure passing through the crowd and said to Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, “I won’t disturb your family any longer. Goodbye.”

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “Please.”

“Come, young masters,” Deng Mande happily said, holding one of each of their hands.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen walked side by side behind them.

The guards followed closely.

In the shade near the Ferris wheel, several young gentlemen watched the playing children while chatting, with Yan Ge as the center of their conversation.

“Do you see that? That young gentleman over there is Young Master Qin, the owner of the First Company.”

“Really? He’s so young!”

“As far as I know, the First Company owns an amusement park, as well as a garment workshop, a jewelry store, a pharmacy, a toy house, a pen manufacturing factory, a toothpaste and toothbrush shop… it has everything.”

“He’s truly a talented young man!”

“Ah, he’s so capable. What chance do we have against him?”

“Hehe! Wen Xian, Ye Ziyang, and Zhang Mo have gotten close to Young Master Qin and are making a fortune. The Zhao family offended Young Master Qin and can nolonger survive in the capital. So, never entertain any crooked thoughts.” This person was well-informed.

“Have you heard? Even the owner of the Zhuguang Pavilion went to the Linlang Pavilion in the First Company to buy jewelry!”

“But don’t you find it strange? The First Company is too deep. Nobody has been able to uncover Young Master Qin’s background, especially his even more mysterious husband, Huang Chenyu. I’ve never even heard of him.” This was the well-informed person speaking.

“You even know his husband is called Huang Chenyu?”

“That’s right. Otherwise, how could I live up to my reputation as an informant?”

Bao Zhiheng was not far away, and his face looking unpleasant. He didn’t come here today to bring his child to play but to see what this amusement park was all about. The carousel, elephant slide, Ferris wheel, swing,

bungee jumping, pirate chase, elevator, trampoline, maze… everything was novel and astonishing. He was about to leave when he overheard this conversation, which made him infuriated.

Young Master Qin's name was like a hurricane, sweeping through the entire capital. It was no wonder the Zhao family had hired an assassin to deal with him in the past. He was a disaster for other businessmen in the capital. However, there was nothing he could do, he didn't want to end up like the Zhao family.

"Father, I am unable to continue." The little prince's clothes were completely soaked with sweat, and his face was dirty. Exhausted, he bent over, supporting his knees with his hands. He moved closer to Yan Ge and panted with his mouth open, while his eyes regretfully gazed at the unplayed attractions, causing Yan Ge to suppress his laughter.

Yan Ge, on the other hand, was relaxed, feeding the little prince a glass of juice. Passersby couldn't help but glance at this scene of pampering and love, smiling knowingly.

Yan Ge smiled and said, "If you can't play anymore, then let's not play. We'll have more chances in the future. Rest for now, and I'll take you for a bath."

After bathing and changing into fresh and clean clothes, the group returned home. The little prince and Yan Ge fell fast asleep in the swaying carriage.

Upon returning to the palace, Huang Fu Yuchen had someone escort them to their residence. He was busy reviewing the accumulated memorials, and Yan Ge accompanied him. Huang Fu Yuchen would first categorize all the memorials, and some of the simpler ones he would have Yan Ge review. He only need to approve 'agree' or 'reject', and for someone who had already begun cultivating, imitating Huang Fu Yuchen's handwriting was a piece of cake.

As for matters of the harem being involved in politics, Deng Mande acted like he hadn't seen anything.

Now, let's talk about Bai Jushen. He had only gone to the amusement park to show face for the boss, but Wen Xian caught him and somehow convinced him to stay and work as a laborer for a day. It was almost dark when he finally had the opportunity to return to Linlang Pavilion.

He checked the doors from top to bottom to ensure they were locked properly, confirmed that the night shift had been arranged, and took the jewelry he had prepared to give to his mother back to Bai Mansion.

"Young Master Bai, you're back." Butler Bai Cai, smiled broadly and bowed to him.

Bai Jushen responded with a nonchalant "Mmm." When he hadn't left Bai Mansion, his father didn't value him, and even the servants in the house dared to look down on him. Ever since he started working at the First Company, these people had started currying favor with him again. But he could care less.

Walking through the Lengmei Garden, he stood at the circular entrance for quite a while before entering. The laughter coming from the room made him pause, and when he saw the people inside, his face turned cold.

"What are you doing here?"

Bai Juyao, the eldest son of the Bai family, stood up with a smile, being very polite. "Second brother, you're back. Since you're rarely at home, I was afraid mother would be lonely, so I came to keep her company and have a chat."

Wei Niang grasped Bai Jushen's arm, reproachfully saying, "Why are you talking to your elder brother like that? Your elder brother came over specifically to see me, and even had dinner with me."

Bai Jushen helped her sit down, ignoring Bai Juyao, and handed her the jewelry box. "Niang, it's been a long time since you bought new jewelry. This is something I bought for you. Take a look and see if you like it."

*Children of concubines are not allowed to call their biological mothers “mother”, only the legitimate wife is called “mother”.

Niang means “father’s concubine”.

Bai Juyao noticed the marking on the jewelry box and smiled, saying, “Niang, second brother is truly filial. This is jewelry from Linlang Pavilion.”

Wei Niang nervously said, “I heard that jewelry from Linlang Pavilion is especially expensive. Jushen, how did…”

Bai Jushen tapped her hand. “Niang, please don’t overthink. Because I am an employee of the company, I can enjoy the privilege of ‘installment payments.’”

“Oh, I see.” Wei Niang opened the jewelry box and nodded repeatedly. “They’re truly beautiful. However, Mother is getting older and doesn’t need so much jewelry. Please refrain from spending money recklessly in the future.”

Bai Juyao interjected, “Niang, this is a heartfelt gift from my younger brother. Please accept it wholeheartedly.”

“Why haven’t you left yet?” Bai Jushen’s expression turned sour.

Bai Juyao sighed helplessly. “Brother, you misunderstand me deeply. The main purpose of my visit this time was to convey a message to Wei Niang. I have convinced Father to cancel your engagement to Young Master Liao. Alright, I’ll leave and won’t disturb you any further.”

Wei Niang was overjoyed. “Jushen, that’s wonderful. Your father still cares about you. I always thought Young Master Liao wasn’t a suitable match for you.”

However, Bai Jushen's face grew even darker. He understood Bai Juyao well; he would never act so benevolently.

Without time to explain to his mother, he quickly caught up to Bai Juyao.

"Wait!"

"Do you have something else to say?" Bai Juyao turned back, a strange smile on his face. His hands were clasped behind his back as he calmly observed Bai Jushen.

"What are you plotting, exactly?" Bai Jushen asked calmly.

"Oh, you've figured it out?" Bai Juyao shrugged. "I never expected you to be so fortunate as to climb up to Young Master Qin. It seems that men with a flower body are truly blessed, not just a mere legend. There's no harm in telling you. You know that the Bai family is in the wine business, and that Young Master Qin wants a share in any profitable venture. In my opinion, it's only a matter of time before he opens his own distillery. Your fiancé has become less useful, and Father's intention is for you to marry Huang Chenyu or Wen Xian. In short, if we can align ourselves with the First Company, the status of our Bai family will soar."

Bai Jushen was so angry that his stomach ached. Wen Xian was still unmarried, but they were even considering marrying him off to Huang Chenyu. How could they even conceive of such a thing!

"Dream on!" Bai Jushen's anger grew fierce, but he calmed down. "Listen well. I am a person, not a possession. I will never be manipulated by you or anyone else."

Bai Juyao laughed heartily. "Do you really think you can resist? Bai Jushen, don't you understand yet? As long as Wei Niang remains in the Bai family, you can never truly escape from it! Will Wei Niang leave the Bai family? No, she won't! She went through great lengths to enter the Bai family, so how could she leave? Hehehe…"

Bai Jushen watched him walk away as he laughed heartily, and he turned back to Lengmei Garden.

“Jushen, what’s wrong?” Wei Niang approached, her concern evident.

Bai Jushen grasped her shoulder. “Mother, we’re leaving the Bai family! Completely leaving.”

The word ‘mother’ caused Wei Niang’s lips to tremble, and her beautiful eyes shimmered with tears. “Jushen… but how can Mother leave the master?”

“Why can’t we?” Bai Jushen sat down and locked eyes with her. “He doesn’t care about us at all. Who is the person who has only visited you three times since my birth? Clearly, it was Bai Juyao who insulted the young maid, Dongmei, but who beat me instead? Who is the one constantly scheming to marry me off to someone who indulges in drinking, eating, whoring, and gambling.”

With each word he spoke, Wei Niang’s face grew paler.

“But Mother loves him,” Wei Niang murmured absentmindedly. “Mother has loved him for over ten years…”

“Do you not want to leave?” Bai Jushen asked in a soft voice.

Wei Niang hesitated and said, “If you marry a chicken, follow the chicken; if you marry a dog, follow the dog, Mother…”

Bai Jushen stopped trying to persuade her. The voice in his heart was resolute: Fine, if you can’t make up your mind, I’ll help you, Mother.

Less than half an hour later, the flames soared high in the Lengmei Garden.

Gao Feng was startled awake by the knocking sound and looked puzzled at Bai Jushen, who was holding someone in front of him.

“Gao Feng, I know you must have a way to find the boss. I need the boss’s help for something…”

MCUS Chapter 74

“That unfilial child!”

After the fire in the Lengmei Garden of the Bai Residence was extinguished, only two charred bodies remained. At first, Bai Shuli thought that the accidental fire had killed Wei Niang and his second son. But in less than two days, someone reported to him that they had seen Bai Jushen at the Linlang Pavilion. He personally went to find Bai Jushen for a clear explanation, but not only did Bai Jushen pretend not to know him, he also used the excuse of hindering business at the Linlang Pavilion to have him sent to the authorities. It was then that he realized that Bai Jushen had somehow tampered with his and Wei Niang’s household registration and assumed new identities. They both became people unrelated to the Bai Mansion!

“Father, calm down. This matter must be related to Young Master Qin, the boss of the First Company,” Bai Juyao speculated.

Bai Shuli’s anger instantly diminished by half. “Young Master Qin? We can’t afford to offend him… The Zhao family serves as a warning. I’m afraid we can only let it go.”

“Father, Bai Jushen has defied and disrespected you. Can you swallow this?” Bai Juyao asked. He had long been considering splitting the family property, but the laws of the Great Han stipulated that illegitimate sons could only receive forty percent of the family’s assets. If he didn’t completely beat Bai Jushen to the ground, he wouldn’t be able to rest easy.

“Even if I can’t swallow it, what can I do? That unfilial son!” Bai Shuli hadn’t completely lost his wits yet. “Let’s drop this matter and not mention it again. Unless you want to wager the entire Bai family.”

Bai Juyao smiled and approached him. “Of course, we don’t have to take matters into our own hands. Young Master Qin has plenty of enemies. Yiyi is not loyal to his boss, Bao Zhiheng of the Zhuguang Pavilion, and Liang Jian of the Kang Family’s Writing Shop also hold a grudge against him. With a little instigation, there will be a good show. Even Zhang Mo from the Clothing Workshop can be used. His son was recently poisoned in the Intelligence Toy House. If there’s another incident of poisoning related to the First Company, Zhang Mo will surely turn against Young Master Qin. Perhaps it won’t greatly impact the First Company, but at least it will allow us to vent our frustrations!”

“I didn’t expect you to appear decent on the surface, but be so ruthless inside.”

Suddenly, a man’s voice came from outside the study. Bai Juyao and Bai Shuli both exclaimed, “Who’s there!”

Bai Juyao opened the door, and in the courtyard stood two men in black, holding swords in their arms, their faces expressionless as they looked at them.

“Who are you?” Bai Juyao cautiously assumed a defensive stance.

“Us?” one of the black-clad men smiled coldly and leisurely replied, “We are under the employ of Master Huang. We heard your conversation very clearly, and we understood it very well.”

Bai Shuli and Bai Juyao’s faces changed drastically, and they inwardly cursed.

“No, no, it’s actually a misunderstanding—”

“Rest assured, we won’t harm you.” The other black-clad man interrupted him. “But…”

Bai Shuli and Bai Juyao’s hearts hadn’t settled down yet when they were raised once again.

“In the future, whether it’s Young Master Liao, Bao Zhiheng, Kang Jian, or Zhang Mo causing trouble for Young Master Qin, we will hold you responsible. If you don’t believe it, you can try. Heh heh, goodbye.”

The two black-clad men exchanged glances, their figures suddenly disappearing like black mist.

Bai Shuli and Bai Juyao looked at each other, slumping to the ground. With great effort, they managed to muster the strength to stand up.

However, the two shadows returned. Father and son looked at them and simultaneously asked, “Why did you come back?”

The first black-clad man raised his hand and slapped Bai Shuli and Bai Juyao across the face, saying, “I almost forgot. Master Huang ordered me to do this. He said those who dare to oppose Young Master Qin must be rewarded.”

Bai Shuli and Bai Juyao slumped to the ground once again, holding their chests and not daring to make a sound.

Suddenly, the second black-clad man also raised his hand and gave Bai Shuli and Bai Juyao each a slap.

The first black-clad man looked at him.

The second black-clad man said, “Well, I had also forgotten. This is from Young Master Qin. He said those who dare to have designs on Master Huang must be taught a lesson.”

The two men exchanged glances, nodded, and disappeared once again.

Bai Shuli and Bai Juyao sat on the ground, covered in sweat. After waiting for a long time without the two black-clad men reappearing, they dared to stand up.

Wei Niang had stayed at the First Company for a few days. Just as she was about to leave, she was stopped by Bai Jushen.

“Mother, where are you going?”

“After being away for so long, Mother wants to go back and see your father.”

“Mother, isn’t it good to live here? Boss Qin has been kind to us, and the people here are pleasant to be around. I want to call you mother, and you can have a new life here. You don’t have to think about returning to the Bai Mansion. That night, I set fire to the Lengmei Garden. Now, there is no Wei Niang in this world, and there is no Bai Jushen either. I changed my name to Wei Jushen. If you hate me, then hate me.” Wei Jushen finished speaking and turned away.

Wei Niang stood still in place, dazed. After a long while, she forced a bitter smile and said, “Silly child… how could mother ever hate you? Perhaps… all mother needed was a reason to leave…”

Another month passed in the blink of an eye.

With a sudden impulse, Yan Ge checked the system’s mission list and remembered that there was an unfinished side mission – to send Song Ruhao and Du Zhengfeng into the cold palace. Seeing Huangfu Yuchen sound asleep in bed, he tiptoed over and sat on the footstool. He pinched a strand of hair and tickled Huangfu Yuchen’s ear.

Huangfu Yuchen was in a deep sleep and only tilted his head slightly. Yan Ge continued tickling, and Huangfu Yuchen still didn’t open his eyes. He reached out his long arm and accurately pulled Yan Ge by the waist, exerting force to bring him onto the bed, causing Yan Ge to fall on top of him.

Only then did Huangfu Yuchen open his eyes, cupping Yan Ge’s face and giving him a kiss on the lips. His voice was slightly hoarse from just waking up. “Feeling bored all by yourself?”

“No,” Yan Ge replied. “Has there been any news from Chunfeng Palace recently?”

Huangfu Yuchen fully woke up and stroked his hair. “Song Guiren has been acting normally. As for Du Zhengfeng, I had him investigate who exactly is behind Xing’er, but unfortunately, there hasn’t been any progress. The other side is quite cautious. Why do you suddenly ask about this?”

Yan Ge felt a little disappointed. Du Zhengfeng was Huangfu Yuchen’s man, so he let it go. If Song Ruhao didn’t take any action, how could he find an opportunity to send him to the cold palace?

“It’s nothing. It just came to mind, so I asked. Go back to sleep.” Yan Ge playfully reached out and covered Huangfu Yuchen’s eyes with his hand.

“I think you’re intentionally provoking me,” Huangfu Yuchen said as he rolled over, pressing Yan Ge beneath him. “Since you’re so bored, I’ll play with you for a while.”

“What do you want to play?” Yan Ge pretended to be clueless.

“What do you think?” Huangfu Yuchen’s hand moved, and he unhooked the golden hook of the bed curtain, causing the heavily draped curtain to cascade down like water, concealing the scenery behind the bed.

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After class with the prince, Song Chaobang personally accompanied the young prince back to Yongyi Palace, as usual.

The empress also welcomed Song Chaobang as usual to show her respect.

“Empress, you seem a bit unwell. Please take care of your well-being.”

The empress forced a smile. Today, she saw Yan Cairen and the emperor enjoying themselves in the Imperial Garden, so naturally, her mood wasn’t good. However, Song Chaobang was an outsider, and she couldn’t bring up these matters with him.

“I appreciate the concern of the Grand Tutor. I am fine.”

Song Chaobang seemed to have something else to say, and she added, “If Grand Tutor Song has something to say, please feel free. Could it be that there are any problems with the prince’s studies?”

The senior palace maid Chunhui and the eunuch Xiao Xiang beside her also looked at Song Chaobang curiously.

Song Chaobang hesitated, “I’m just concerned about the emperor.”

The empress had someone take the young prince away and asked in surprise, “Why would Grand Tutor Song say such a thing?”

Song Chaobang said, “I heard from the Crown Prince that the emperor is showing excessive favoritism toward Yan Cairen… and I am genuinely worried. Such favoritism in the harem is not only detrimental to harmony within the palace but also detrimental to the harmony of the state. However, as an outsider, I…”

The empress’s breath hitched as the previously vanished heartache resurfaced.

It was like a whisper in her ears: Your husband has been snatched away and your son is not far from being snatched away as well, who would be reconciled?

But the empress wasn’t foolish. There was a Song Guiren, the son of Song Chaobang, in Chunfeng Palace. She didn’t believe that Song Chaobang suddenly brought up this matter without any ulterior motives. Moreover, even if Song Chaobang had no ulterior motives, as the mother of the nation, she had to think twice before taking action. If her inappropriate behavior affected the Crown Prince, it would be sacrificing the greater for the lesser.

“I have heard about this matter. Grand Tutor Song’s words are reasonable. The emperor’s excessive favoritism towards Yan Cairen is not only detrimental to harmony within the harem but also detrimental to harmony within the state. However, as a mere woman, I don’t have any particular ideas. I wonder if Grand Tutor Song has any suggestions?”

“Well…” Song Chaobang pondered for a moment. “I can’t claim to have any exceptional ideas. As a current solution, both the harem and the court should speak to the emperor together.”

The empress’s spirits trembled, and she nodded. “In that case, I will join forces with Consort Rou, Consort Zhao, Consort Li, and Consort Zheng to submit a memorial to the emperor.”

“I, too, will devote myself wholeheartedly to serving the country,” Song Chaobang said.

Halfway through their dinner, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were interrupted by a shadow guard.

“Reporting to Your Majesty, the empress and the four consorts have jointly submitted a memorial requesting an audience with the emperor. It concerns Yan Cairen,” the guard said.

Yan Ge raised an eyebrow and continued eating his food.

Huangfu Yuchen’s silverware paused mid air. “The empress has been quiet for so long, but her sudden actions must have a reason. Have there been any suspicious individuals entering and leaving Yongyi Palace these past few days?”

The guard replied, “This afternoon, Prime Minister Song stayed in Yongyi Palace for a longer time than usual.”

Yan Ge’s eyes lit up. Song Ruhao and Song Chaobang were finally taking action? Could he seize this opportunity to send Song Ru Hao into the cold palace?

Huangfu Yuchen raised his hand to dismiss the guard. “Could it be that Prime Minister Song influenced the empress? It doesn’t seem like Prime Minister Song’s style. Yan Ge, you seem quite pleased?”

Yan Ge denied it. “No, not at all. Even when I’m not smiling, you think I’m smiling.”

Huangfu Yuchen smiled skeptically, not believing his words. “Deng Mande, invite Du Zhengfeng.”

He specifically mentioned Du Zhengfeng, not ‘Du Changzai.’ Soon after, Du Zhengfeng quietly arrived.

“This subordinate pays respects to Your Majesty,” Du Zhengfeng said.

“Has Song Ruhao shown any abnormalities recently?” Huangfu Yuchen asked.

Du Zhengfeng replied, “Your Majesty, yesterday, Song Guiren secretly met with Prime Minister Song. Song Guiren is worried that Yan Cairen will soon be promoted to Guiren status and urged Prime Minister Song to find a way to prevent it.”

Huangfu Yuchen dismissed him and stood up, embracing Yan Ge. After a moment of contemplation, he said, “Very well. Haven’t we anticipated this day? Are you prepared?”

“Of course,” Yan Ge replied confidently. “I want to see how they will try to pressure us.”

During the morning court session the next day, Huangfu Yuchen, dressed in imperial robes, approached the Hall. He scanned the neatly arranged civil and military officials, a faint trace of mockery curling up at the corner of his lips. Slowly, he ascended the steps and took his seat on the dragon throne.

The officials kneeled down and hailed, “Long live, the emperor! Long live!”

“Rise, my ministers.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“If you have something to report, speak up. If not, leave the court,” Deng Mande shouted with the usual rhetoric, but his voice was particularly loud today.

A few officials exchanged glances, their actions not escaping Huangfu Yuchen’s gaze as he sat in the elevated seat, seemingly oblivious. “If there’s nothing…”

The Left Censor stood up and said, “Your Majesty, I have something to report.”

“Speak.”

The Left Censor said, “News of Your Majesty’s singular favor towards Yan Cairen has reached the public. This not only undermines the harmony between the empress and the consorts but also undermines the harmony of the court. I, humbly, request Your Majesty to treat all with impartiality.”

Yan Xiaojing gasped inwardly. No wonder his right eyelid had been twitching incessantly since this morning.

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The Deputy Imperial Historian spoke, “This humble minister concurs. The royal family has always emphasized the importance of having many children and grandchildren to bring blessings to the country. However, Yan Cairen is a male consort.”

“I also concur,” the Chief Officer added, “Since Your Majesty favors Yan Cairen, it indicates that he possesses exceptional qualities. However, it is natural for us to worry that Yan Cairen might influence and seduce Your Majesty to…”

Huangfu Yuhen’s face turned livid. He had anticipated that these people would not speak favorably, but he never expected them to slander his beloved like this.

Yan Xiaojing swiftly stepped forward, his words resounding with authority, “Report to Your Majesty, the Chief Officer has committed a grave offense of treason! Your Majesty, as a wise and powerful ruler, cannot be easily swayed. Such words are disrespectful to Your Majesty! Throughout the history of the Huangfu Dynasty, male consorts have been regarded as symbols of good fortune. Yet, the Chief Officer dares to show such disrespect to our ancestors!”

The Chief Officer’s face paled, and he immediately dropped to his knees, regretting his decision to accept those 500 taels of silver. “I never meant any harm, Your Majesty! Please forgive me.”

Within Huangfu Yuchen, a storm of fury brewed amidst the clamor. “Yesterday, I received a memorial from the empress and the four consorts. Today, several officials have presented reports concerning Yan Cairen. This leads me to suspect, have you all conspired in advance? Should I be

gratified by the harmony within the court and the harem? Otherwise, why do all of you hold such grudges against Yan Cairen?”

His gaze subtly swept across Song Chaobang’s face, but Song Chaobang remained calm, his expression unchanged.

“We dare not—” the censors hastily protested in unison.

Song Chaobang cast a disdainful glance at them, “Report to Your Majesty, truthfully, even I share the concerns of these officials. Yan Cairen, as a male consort, cannot bear children and ensure the continuation of the royal lineage. Your Majesty should not invest too much time in him.”

Huangfu Yuchen calmly surveyed his ministers, “Prime Minister Wen, do you share the same view?”

Prime Minister Wen’s surname was Jiang, while Prime Minister Wu’s surname was Jiang as well, so their titles were used to avoid confusion.

Prime Minister Wen boldly declared, “I dare not agree. Since the arrival of the new consort, Your Majesty has diligently attended to state affairs without any neglect due to a particular consort. It is evident that the so-called ‘captivation and seduction’ is baseless!”

Huangfu Yuchen Chen nodded, “And what do you think, Prince Dai?”

Huangfu Yuhu glanced at Song Chaobang and spoke with a raised voice, “Your Majesty is also a human being. Is there anything wrong with having someone you love? Your majesty is already burdened with the affairs of the country, so should you not be able to find solace in the harem? Grand Tutor, if I remember correctly, your household not only has a beloved wife but also a beautiful concubine, does it not?”

Song Chaobang’s face flushed. His concubine was brought into the household when he was young, but Prince Dai made it sound like she had recently entered. Unfortunately, he couldn’t make a retort.

The Left Associate Censor interjected, “Although that may be true, if news of this spreads to the common people, how will they perceive it? The commoners do not understand the intricacies; they may misunderstand Yan Cairen and accuse him of harming the country. We are also concerned for Yan Cairen’s sake. Please consider this, Your Majesty.”

This person was not afraid of death. Huangfu Yuchen looked at Deng Mande.

Deng Mande whispered in his ear, “Your Majesty, the Left Associate Censor is a disciple of Grand Tutor Song.”

Huangfu Yuchen sneered, “Left Associate Censor, last month we discussed more effective measures to reduce flooding in the Jiangnan region, and I did not hear your suggestions. When General Yao was recently dealt with for his corrupt practices, I did not hear a word from you either. How is it that you suddenly find your voice today? Or should I conclude that you believe I am a new emperor with limited experience and easier to manipulate?”

The Left Associate Censor’s legs weakened, and he knelt on the ground, “I dare not!”

The other ministers did not dare to make a sound. This was the first time the new emperor had shown such fury since his ascension.

“To the common people,” Huangfu Yuchen sneered, standing up and slowly walking to the edge of the raised throne, overlooking the courtiers, his imperial power emanating, “They dare to meddle in our private affairs! Chen Guowei, do you believe the common people would misunderstand Yan Cairen and accuse him of harming the country?”

Chen Guowei, the Minister of Revenue, spoke in a resolute voice, “Report to Your Majesty, I believe the common people will not only refrain from misunderstanding Yan Cairen but also perceive him as a patriot!”

The courtiers regarded him with eyes that said, “Have you gone mad?” Flattery was not meant to be delivered in such a manner.

“What is the basis of this claim?” Huangfu Yuchen’s voice was gentle.

Chen Guowei said, “In just a few months, Yan Cairen has donated 200,000 taels of silver to the national treasury. If such a person does not love the country, what kind of person can be called patriotic?”

As the Minister of Revenue, responsible for taxation, household registration, the national treasury, military supplies, and grain distribution, it was impossible for him to miss the fact that Yan Cairen had donated 200,000 taels of silver to the national treasury. Huangfu Yuchen had already informed him of Yan Cairen’s departure from the palace to engage in business.

The courtiers were in an uproar, all looking at Yan Xiaojing.

Yan Xiaojing was only a low-ranking official with a monthly salary of a dozen taels, and there was no evidence of him accepting bribes. He was known for his integrity. Yan Cairen’s mother seemed to come from an ordinary affluent family, so where did the family come up with so much silver?

Song Chaobang gave a lesser official a signal with his eyes.

The young official bit his teeth. “Why does Your Majesty play such a big joke with the ministers? This humble minister dares to ask Your Majesty to consider the overall situation and confine Yan Cairen to the cold palace!”

The great hall fell Into silence, and not even the sound of a falling needle could be heard.

“Outrageous!” Huangfu Yuchen roared.

The ministers were frightened and all knelt down. “Please calm down, Your Majesty!”

Huangfu Yuchen snorted, “Summon Yan Cairen.”

“Yan Cairen, please enter the hall—”

From the unusual tone of the eunuch's announcement, the ministers could feel the favor the Emperor had for Yan Cairen.

In a moment, a person with an extraordinary temperament walked into the hall. It was Yan Cairen, with a smile on his lips, calmly and unhurriedly entering the hall. At this moment, he was not wearing court attire but rather his casual attire for walking outside the palace—a graceful white shirt, exuding an elegant and carefree demeanor.

"Yan Cairen pays his respects to Your Majesty." Yan Cairen walked to the center of the hall and slightly bowed.

"You don't have to be so formal." Huangfu Yuchen stepped down from the steps and walked to his side.

"He is…Young Master Qin! The owner of the First Company!" The Minister of Works recognized Yan Cairen and his eyes were wide from astonishment.

Song Chaobang's face was filled with shock. Yan Cairen's second identity was like a slap to his old face.

Huangfu Yuhu stared at Yan Cairen with his mouth agape, his eyes fixed on him.

For the first time, Yan Xiaojing had the opportunity to show his pride in front of others openly.

Yan Cairen smiled, looked around at everyone, his tone devoid of any anger but rather cheerful. "My Lords, it is not impossible to confine me to the cold palace if you can do without concise maps, refrain from dining at Liuxian Pavilion, avoid eating barbecue, stop using toothpaste and toothbrushes, give up writing with fountain pens, not take your grandchildren to the amusement park, refrain from buying medicine at Ping'an Pharmacy, and avoid purchasing jewelry at Linlang Pavilion for your wives or intellectual toys for your grandchildren… And in the future, refrain from drinking the fine wine of the First Company. I can consider taking the initiative to go to the cold palace. What do you think?"

The ministers all revealed expressions of astonishment. Yan Cairen turned out to be the owner of the First Company, Young Master Qin!

Who was Young Master Qin? He was a person who had brought about tremendous changes not only to the capital but also to the entire kingdom! Such a person not only couldn't be confined to the cold palace but should be revered like a bodhisattva!

Huangfu Yuchen let out a cold snort, and the ministers all shrank their necks.

"Summon the Crown Prince." Huangfu Yuchen said, then left a sentence and walked to the dragon throne, standing side by side with Yan Cairen.

After a moment, a small figure in bright yellow raised its head and confidently stepped into the hall.

"This son pays respects to Father Emperor, long live, Your Majesty!"

"Rise."

The Crown Prince stood up and bowed to Yan Cairen again. "Greetings, Yan Cairen."

"No need to be so formal, Crown Prince." Yan Cairen smiled.

The young Crown Prince turned to the ministers and glared at them. "This Crown Prince won't allow you to bully Second Master! Second Master knows a lot, not only able to perform calculations using simpler methods, but he is also knowledgeable in many other things."

The ministers suddenly realized that the "Second Master" mentioned by the Crown Prince during the celebration was Yan Cairen.

"Does anyone have anything else to say?" Huangfu Yuchen asked coldly.

The ministers remained silent, secretly thinking about what else they could say. They quickly considered apologizing to Yan Cairen. As ministers, they rarely had the opportunity to meet Yan Cairen, but they could take the time

to visit the Yan Mansion. As for the imperial consort freely engaging in business, although unheard of, it was the Emperor's decision. Whoever wanted to seek death could go ahead and bring it up.

Huangfu Yuchen cast a cold gaze at the Left Censor, the Middle Censor, and the Lesser official. "Take them away! Remove the black hats from the Left Censor and the Middle Censor for their lack of consideration for state affairs and impudent remarks about the imperial consorts. As they have made contributions to the nation in the past, only the black hats will be removed. As for the lesser official, for speaking without proper investigation and audaciously remonstrating, dismiss him from his position and investigate further!"

The Left Censor, the Middle Censor, and the lesser official had their black hats removed, their faces ashen. Their official careers ended here, their lifelong efforts in vain. How could they not feel devastated?

Song Chaobang's vest was completely soaked with sweat. The Left Censor and the lesser official were his students. Was the Emperor warning him with this action?

"Take them away!" Huangfu Yuchen showed no mercy to the ministers, his expression icy. "When it comes to matters of the state or even when advising on my own actions, as long as it benefits the nation, I will not only refrain from punishing, but also reward generously! However, anyone who dares to criticize my personal affairs will face dire consequences."

The ministers all knelt in fear and loudly responded, "We obey your orders!"

The young Crown Prince looked up at Huangfu Yuchen, his eyes shining like black grapes, filled with admiration and adoration.

Huangfu Yuchen continued, "Draft the decree—starting today, the First Company shall bear the imperial seal and be known as the Imperial Merchant. Announce this to the world."

"Yes!" Deng Mande said.

Once again, the ministers collectively exclaimed, “Congratulations, Your Majesty!”

Huangfu Yuchen added, “Yan Cairen has made significant contributions. Grant him the noble title of Guiren.”

“Yes.”

—“Ding. Congratulations on successfully completing Main Mission 7—being promoted to Guiren. Mission success rewards: 5,000 taels of silver, ‘Fengyun Immortal Records’ cultivation method up to the Late Enlightenment stage.
Main mission 8—being promoted by the Emperor to Shiqing. Mission success rewards: 10,000 taels of silver, ‘Fengyun Immortal’ cultivation method up to the Early Golden Core stage. Mission failure deducts 10,000 taels of silver. Accept the mission by selecting ‘Yes,’ reject the mission by selecting ‘No.’”

Yan Ge accepted the mission without hesitation and leaned in close to Emperor Huangfu Yuchen’s ear, puzzled. “I thought you would announce that “Nan Yi” is actually “fei” and is a new character meaning “male consort” and reveal my identity.”

Huangfu Yuchen also leaned in, stealing a kiss at the corner of his mouth while the ministers dared not look up. “Indeed, that was the initial plan. But now you are the one I love, not just a ‘male consort.’ Let’s drop the “fei” meaning and stick with ‘Nan Yi,’ it’s become familiar and rather pleasant.”

“No, it’s fine. We should also consider the future male consorts. It would be better for them to be referred to as ‘fei’ rather than using the ‘female consort” character. I can endure it, let me do this good deed for them.”

Yan Ge spoke openly, amusing Emperor Huangfu Yuchen, who then allowed Deng Mande to add a few sentences to the first imperial edict.

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On that day, several important notice boards in the capital were plastered with imperial edicts. Simultaneously, several fast horses raced out of the city, covering eight hundred miles in urgent haste. Carrier pigeons filled the sky, carrying the emperor’s decrees to the outside world.

“A big event! A big event!” A young master rushed into Liuxian Pavilion, gasping for breath, and collapsed onto the nearest table, exhausted to the point of sticking out his tongue. “Ha…ha…”

“Young Master Zhou, what is this momentous event?” Manager Yuan approached in a few steps. The boss had instructed him to collect all sorts of potentially useful information.

“Im…perial edict… The… owner of the First Company…”

“What? The owner of the First Company is listed on the imperial edict?” Someone quickly reacted.

“He…he…”

“Could it be that he is wanted?” someone asked, their face filled with astonishment.

Manager Yuan glared at him fiercely.

“No…that’s not it…”

“Then he must have received a reward from the emperor?”

“No…that’s not it…”

“Will you hurry up and tell us?”

At this moment, another person rushed in. This person was more agile and shouted, “The owner of the First Company is An imperial consort,” before collapsing on the ground, gasping for air.

Manager Yuan’s mouth went wide in disbelief, and he called over a waiter to go and see what the imperial edict was all about. The waiter threw aside the cloth and rushed out.

Almost everyone in Liuxian Pavilion ran over, surrounding the person sitting on the ground, bombarding them with questions:

“What? Am I hearing correctly? The owner of the First Company is an imperial consort?”

“Impossible! How could the emperor allow his consort to come out and reveal himself?”

“But he is quite approachable. I’ve never heard of him abusing his power.”

The first person to arrive finally caught their breath, but there was no one around them, causing them to roll their eyes in disbelief.

At the bulletin board near the city gate, once the yellow imperial edict was posted, the common people swarmed around, layer after layer. Although most of the common people were illiterate, they knew the significance of this color—it was an imperial edict.

“May I ask, young master, what does it say?” Since there were few literate people among the commoners, one of the soldiers stationed by the imperial edict was specifically tasked with reading it aloud. “The owner of the First Company, Young Master Qin, is actually an imperial consort. He has now been ennobled as Yan Guiren. The First Company will henceforth become the Imperial Merchant. Furthermore, the emperor has specially invented a new character for him, ‘male consort,’ which is read as ‘fei”.

“Ah? So you mean to say that the fountain pens we use were invented by the imperial consort?”

“And the toothbrushes and toothpaste too?”

The entire capital was in an uproar. People joyfully beat drums, set off firecrackers. Even the illiterate peasants who had never been to school knew that with such talented individuals in the dynasty, the Great Han Kingdom would become even stronger.

“Fellow countrymen, the toothbrushes and toothpaste we use, the fountain pens our children use, and the intellectual toys, they were all invented by Yan Guiren. Having such an imperial consort in the Great Han Kingdom is truly a blessing! The grace of the emperor is boundless!”

When Bai Jushen and Wen Xian received the news, they were busy in Linlang Pavilion and the amusement park respectively.

Bai Jushen accidentally scalded his foot with hot tea, while Wen Xian was inspecting an elevator and clumsily fell to the ground.

Bai Residence

Bai Juyao muttered in disbelief, “What did you say? Young Master Qin’s real name is Yan Ge, and his true identity is the imperial consort? And now he has been ennobled by the emperor?”

“Yes, Young Master Bai.”

Bai Shuli remorsefully pounded his thigh and pointed at him, “It’s all because of you! If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t have severed ties with your brother! If we could have even the slightest relationship with Yan Guiren, our Bai family—ahh!”

Bai Juyao mouth was wide open in surprise, “This… I didn’t expect…”

Yongyi Palace

The Empress leaned softly against the back of the chair and sighed bitterly. “It’s over, it’s over…”

Chunfeng Palace

Song Ruhao casually picked up a vase and slammed it heavily on the ground.

Tenglong Palace

Huangfu Yuchen approached Yan Ge, wanting to get intimate with him, but was pushed away ruthlessly, his face held back. “Behave. Today’s events in the capital will surely cause a sensation. I have to take advantage of the opportunity to make a fortune, lest it disrespects my status.”

Huangfu Yuchen looked at him speechlessly as he rummaged through a stack of papers, not knowing what he was looking for. Unable to bear it any longer, he lifted him up and threw him onto the dragon bed…

The next day

“Greetings to Yan Guiren.”

“Everyone, no need for formalities.” Yan Ge said as he stepped down from the carriage. However, he had only gone a few hundred meters to a snack shop to buy breakfast when he was greeted by eight or nine people happily bowing to him, their faces almost frozen with smiles.

“Yan Guiren, these are fresh vegetables grown in our village. Now the son of a commoner writes with a pen, which saves a lot more money than before.”

“Yan Guiren, these are eggs laid by our own chickens. It’s a small token of our appreciation.”

“Yan Guiren…”

…..

Yan Ge was surrounded by vegetables, fruits, and eggs, and his mouth twitched. Being too amiable and affable wasn't necessarily a good thing.

He had his servant accept the gifts and struggled to maintain his usual pace as he walked towards the carriage. Inside the carriage, he immediately instructed someone to summon Gao Feng.

"Gao Feng, go back to the palace and have Yuchen issue a decree. From now on, the common people don't need to kneel and bow when they meet me. They don't need to be too… enthusiastic. Let them act like before."

Gao Feng held back his laughter. "Yes."

Yan Ge breathed a sigh of relief and said to Xiao Chuanzi, "Take me directly to the company. You go buy breakfast."

"Yes, Master."

In less than a quarter of an hour, a fast horse ran into the city, and four new imperial decrees were posted at the city gates.

"What does it say on there?"

"The Emperor said that from now on, there is no need to kneel and bow when meeting Yan Guiren."

"Ah, Yan Guiren is truly close to the people."

"Yes, indeed."

……

Yan Ge's carriage arrived at Yan Mansion with a clattering sound.

The gate of Yan Mansion was tightly closed, which startled Yan Ge. Could something major have happened at Yan Mansion? After knocking on the door, the joyful expression of the gatekeeper reassured him. As soon as he entered, the gatekeeper swiftly closed the door and secured it with a bolt.

“What’s going on?” Yan Ge asked.

The gatekeeper smiled and replied, “Young Master Yan is now honored as Yan Guiren, and many people came to congratulate us. The master and madam have been receiving guests since early morning, causing a lot of trouble, so I was instructed to lock the main gate.”

Yan Ge forced a smile and said, “That’s the right thing to do.”

Entering the main hall, Madam Yan was engaged in conversation with Yan Su. Behind Madam Yan, the Yan family’s eldest daughter-in-law stood obediently, gently massaging her shoulders.

Yan Xiaojing held a teacup in his hand, lost in thought and contemplating something.

As Yan Ge approached the entrance of the main hall, his steps paused almost imperceptibly. In the past, when he presented the myriad of recipes from Liuxian Residence, Yan Xiaojing might have assumed they came from the palace, and he wouldn’t have harbored suspicions. However, the current Yan Ge was vastly different from the previous one. He brought so many novel things that couldn’t be solely explained by his connections in the palace. If Yan Xiaojing didn’t have doubts, then Yan Ge would be surprised.

“Father, mother, elder brother, elder sister-in-law.”

Since Yan Ge entered alone, and Yan Xiaojing and the others knew he disliked excessive formality within the family, no one paid any ceremonial greetings. They interacted normally.

“You’re back.”

“Mother, I will accompany you later. I have something to discuss with father and elder brother.”

“Alright, your important matters take priority.” Madam Yan smiled.

In the study, Yan Ge went straight to the point and said, “Father, there is something I’ve been keeping from you, mother, and elder brother because I

didn’t want you to worry.”

Yan Xiaojing remained composed and asked, “Is it related to the things you have learned?”

Yan Su’s expression remained unchanged.

Yan Ge nodded, “Yes.”

“What exactly is going on?” Yan Xiaojing asked with a serious expression. He had harbored this curiosity for a long time. However, due to Yan Ge’s rising status and the increasing attention on the Yan family, he didn’t dare to act recklessly, fearing it might endanger Yan Ge. Now that Yan Ge took the initiative to mention it, he wanted to get a clear answer.

Yan Ge said, “Father and elder brother probably haven’t forgotten that I lost my memory after jumping into the lake.”

Yan Xiaojing and Yan Su both nodded, showing concern on their faces.

“Is your health okay now?”

Yan Ge replied, “Yes. Actually, when I was in unconscious, I dreamt of a wise man with white hair and beard. He was a hermit living deep in the mountains, always seeking a disciple to inherit his legacy. He was proficient in divination and felt that I had a destined connection with him. That’s why he found me and imparted various skills to me in my dreams. However, because he was in a hurry to leave on his travels, he inadvertently transferred too much knowledge into my mind, which clashed with my original memories, leading to my amnesia. That’s the whole story. Firstly, this matter is too incredible, and secondly, I was afraid of worrying all of you, so I never dared to tell you. Father, elder brother, I hope you can forgive me.” Yan Ge knew that once the Yan family learned that their son had died, they would be devastated, so he decided to keep the secret of his rebirth buried in his heart.

Yan Su looked shocked.

Yan Xiaojing nodded after a moment and said, “So that’s how it is. It explains why you know so many extraordinary things. This master of yours is truly extraordinary. When I was young, I heard many legends and stories from the elders, including mythical figures who could fly through the heavens and travel between the heavenly realm and the mortal world… This old man must indeed have an extraordinary background.”

Yan Ge felt relieved as his doubts were dispelled. Once he convinced Yan Xiaojing, it would be equivalent to convincing Madam Yan. As for Yan Su, he wouldn’t suspect him based on his words.

With a weight off his mind, Yan Ge returned to the company with ease. Deng Ma, Zhao Cheng, and the others stood neatly in two rows, ready to kneel when they saw him.

“Stop,” Yan Ge halted them, “If you kneel, it’s considered defying an imperial decree!”

The group exchanged glances, unsure of what to do.

Yan Ge smiled and said, “You should know what kind of person I am, don’t you? From now on, you can call me Boss Yan or Yan Guiren, and as for the rest, it should remain the same as before.”

Everyone joyfully responded, “Yes.”

– End of Volume One –

Volume Two: Journey to The South in Disguise

Hey guys, we have come to the end of Volume 1

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~~**I'll continue with the next volume using mtl. It's 80% readable but not edited so terms like "gongzi" instead of "young master" among other stuff will appear ~~.**

Okay, I decided to just do the whole book😄

MCUS Chapter 77

So, as I said previously, I've decided to finish the book😅. I just felt uncomfortable leaving it like that and I also want to see how Yan Ge reaches the top!!

Inside the palace, during the first New Year, Yan Ge was as busy as a spinning top while everyone were on holiday.

After the New Year, he and Huangfu Yuchen were going to disguise themselves and embark on a journey to the south. Before that, they had to arrange the affairs of the company. Linlang Pavilion, the amusement park, the toy house… all were steadily developing.

In November, the newly opened large-scale winery, "Zuixianju," made a big splash as the weather gradually turned cold, and now it was thriving under the management of Gao Feng and Gao Yun. In addition, Yan Ge ordered a large batch of gloves and knee pads, but he kept the news under wraps and stored them in a secret warehouse. They were not to be sold this winter; they had another purpose.

The business of the First Company was growing, and Yan Ge could easily come up with two hundred thousand taels. However, on one hand, he and Huangfu Yuchen were still in the Enlightenment stage of cultivation and didn't need to rush into the next level of techniques. On the other hand, he had gained power too quickly in the past year and needed to restrain himself a bit. Moreover, he was also busy with the company's new development plan. After he left, it would be entrusted to Wei Jushen and Little Jin.

Huangfu Yuchen was also
arranging political matters for the next four months. This southern journey served two purposes.

On one hand, it was an opportunity for Yan Ge to have some fun. On the other hand, it allowed them to inspect the current conditions of the people in the south. They would be accompanied by Deng Mande, Prime Minister Wen Jiang Gan, Grand Tutor Song Chaobang, Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial Guards Yang Zhuo, Imperial Guards Gao Feng and Gao Yun, palace maid Du Juan, Court Physician Zhang, as well as several guards.

The political affairs would be managed by Grand Tutor You and Prince Dai (Huangfu Yuhu), who will be supervised by the six ministers.

“Brother, you’re not taking me with you? I also want to travel around,” Huangfu Yuhu walked discontentedly to the imperial desk, protesting as he looked at Huangfu Yuchen.

“You will obediently stay behind to handle political affairs,” Huangfu Yuchen lowered his head to read the memorials and glanced at him, “Who has been leisurely traveling to various places for two to three months every year for the past five years? Don’t expect it this time.”

“Fine, I’ll stay,” Huangfu Yuhu deflated, but then he smirked, “By the way, I still remember that time we casually saw Yan Guiren in the Imperial Garden, and you dismissively said ‘just a man.’ Who would have thought that you would care so much about him now?”

“He is the person I love,” Huangfu Yuchen thought of Yan Ge, and warmth filled his eyes, “With him, I truly feel alive.”

“Hmm, tsk, tsk!” Huangfu Yuhu snickered.

Huangfu Yuchen cleared his throat, “Enough, you have no business here.”

“Alright, alright, alright, I won’t disturb the Emperor and his ‘important matters,’” Huangfu Yuhu laughed mischievously and quickly fled.

Not long after, a eunuch announced from outside the door, “Announcing to the Emperor, Grand Tutor Song requests an audience.”

“Let him in.”

Song Chaobang walked in with high spirits, “The old minister pays respects to the Emperor.”

“No need for formalities, Teacher. Please have a seat and enjoy some tea,” Huangfu Yuchen was very polite to the Grand Tutor. “It snowed heavily yesterday, and the roads are slippery from the cold. How did Teacher manage to come to the palace?”

Song Chaobang sat down and then stood up again, looking like he had something difficult to say, “To be honest with the Emperor, the old minister has a request.”

“What is it Teacher, speak directly,” Huangfu Yuchen urged.

Song Chaobang knelt on the ground, “The old minister heard that Song Guiren has been ill for a long time, and it’s because of his pent-up worries. I am deeply concerned, so I have gathered the courage to ask the Emperor to allow him to accompany us, so that Song Guiren can relax.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s face showed surprise, “
Song Guiren is ill? Grand Tutor Song, you are mistaken. If he is ill, he should focus on recuperating. At the end of winter, with the extreme cold, Song Guiren shouldn’t leave the palace. But rest assured, We will have all the imperial physicians go to Chunfeng Palace and make sure they provide proper medical treatment for him.”

Song Chaobang’s remaining words were all blocked by Huangfu Yuchen. He was left with a heavy heart, unable to say anything, so he thanked Huangfu Yuchen and left.

Yan Ge walked steadily towards the study, stepping on the creaking snow. Soon, he saw a person approaching from the front.

“Greetings, Prince Dai.”

“Yan Guiren?” Huangfu Yuhu was surprised. He paused in front of Yan Ge, and gazed at him with a smile, “Yan Guiren, there is no need for too much courtesy. Speaking of which, although I often come and go from the palace, this is the first time I’ve met Yan Guiren. I am pleased to meet you.”

Yan Ge smiled but didn’t say anything. There were many eyes and ears within the palace, and Huangfu Yuhu, even if he was close to Huangfu Yuchen, was still an outsider. He couldn’t give anyone an opportunity to gossip.

Huangfu Yuhu could sense what Yan Ge was worried about. He paused for a moment, then smiled again, “Just now, my brother mentioned you to me. Yan Guiren, you have made such significant contributions to the Great Han Kingdom. I also want to express my gratitude to you.”

Yan Ge’s expression remained unchanged, but he frowned inwardly.

Was he overthinking? Did Huangfu Yuhu’s words imply that Huangfu Yuchen’s kindness to him was merely because of his merits to the Great Han Kingdom?

“Prince Dai, your words carry weight, and I dare not refuse. I’ll go ahead and see the Emperor first.”

“Wait.” Huangfu Yuhu held up his hand stove and handed it to Yan Ge, with a faint reproach in his tone. “Why didn’t Yan Guiren bring a hand stove when he came out? You are too careless, take mine.”

“No need to trouble yourself, Prince Dai. The Emperor will make arrangements for me,” Yan Ge gracefully stepped back, evading his hand, nodded, and left on his own.

Huangfu Yuhu was stunned on the spot. Just a minor consort had shown such disrespect to him, a prince. Moreover, he heard that he didn’t even bow to the Emperor, let alone to him. Thinking of this, Huangfu Yuhu shook his head and left.

After walking a while, Wan Xiang couldn’t help but murmur, “Young Master, Prince Dai is too rude. You belong to the Emperor, how could he treat you so lightly?”

Yan Ge warned her with a glance and whispered, “Don’t speak nonsense.”

Wan Xiang stiffened and discreetly scanned her surroundings, “Yes!”

Song Chaobang absentmindedly walked on the snowy path and noticed Yan Ge. His heart stirred, and he quickly approached him.

“Respectful greetings to Yan Guiren.”

Yan Ge slightly turned away, evading his salute, and smiled faintly, “Grand Tutor Song, an elder of two dynasties, with remarkable achievements. I am truly in awe.”

Song Chaobang said, “Yan Guiren, you flatter me. In fact, I have a request.”

Yan Ge became cautious and smoothly changed the topic, “Grand Tutor Song, your high praise is undeserved. If you have any difficulties, you can always consult the Emperor. We are not far from the Imperial Study. I am willing to accompany Grand Tutor Song to see the Emperor. Grand Tutor Song, please.”

“Yan Guiren,” Song Chaobang felt irritated dealing with this slippery person. “I just came out of the Imperial Study, and the Emperor did not agree to my request.”

“In that case, Yan Guiren is powerless,” Yan Ge’s caution grew heavier. “Grand Tutor Song, aren’t you making things difficult for me? If the Emperor does not agree, he must have his reasons. If I were to request it and the Emperor agrees, won’t I be suspected of meddling in politics?” Song Chaobang had once made a remark about him during a court session, so he took the opportunity to retaliate.

Song Chaobang paused and earnestly said, “At that time, I was not targeting Yan Guiren, but acting for the sake of the monarch and the nation. Later, I

realized it was just a misunderstanding, and I should give me apologizes to Yan Guiren."

Yan Ge couldn't really let him apologize, so he could only say, "I dare not."

Song Chaobang sighed, "I am only concerned about Song Guiren's prolonged illness and wanted him to accompany us on the journey south to relax. I hope Yan Guiren can speak a few good words for me in front of the Emperor, considering my position as a father. Besides, this matter is also the Emperor's personal affair and should not be considered meddling in politics."

With the conversation reaching this point, Yan Ge couldn't easily refuse anymore and said, "I will mention this matter to the Emperor, but I cannot guarantee anything."

Song Chaobang hurriedly said, "Thank you, Yan Guiren."

The door to the Imperial Study was pushed open, and a gust of cold wind rushed in. Huangfu Yuchen knew it was Yan Ge without even looking. He ordered, "Hot tea, hand stove, refreshments."

As he spoke, he got up and quickly walked to Yan Ge, wrapping his hand in his warm palm and pulling him towards the couch. "Why did you come here on such a cold day? You didn't even bring a hand stove, nor did you wear warmer clothes."

The couch was covered with a soft fur blanket, warm and comfortable. Huangfu Yuchen pushed him to sit down and grabbed a neatly folded blanket nearby to wrap him up.

The eunuchs and palace maids quickly closed the door, blocking out the cold air, and brought a charcoal brazier to the side of the couch. The high-quality silver-threaded charcoal not only produced no smoke but also emitted a faint fragrance along with high heat.

Deng Mande swiftly poured a steaming cup of tea and placed it on the small table.

“Don’t you know that I’m not afraid of the cold?” Yan Ge used his spiritual sense to communicate with Huangfu Yuchen. Although he said so, he didn’t take his hand away from Huangfu Yuchen’s hand. Instead, he quietly held it.

“Although that’s the case, I can’t help but worry,” Huangfu Yuchen embraced him through the blanket and whispered, “Do you miss me? I’ve been busy these days.”

Yan Ge nodded and relaxed, leaning against him. “When I came in just now, I saw that your complexion wasn’t too good. What happened?”

After Deng Mande and the others retreated, Huangfu Yuchen kissed Yan Ge’s lips a few times and spoke against his lips, “Grand Tutor Song just came, asking me to allow Song Guiren to accompany us on the journey south. You know, I had considered arranging for Song Ruhao to leave the palace if he didn’t want to let him in. But he refused, and at that time, he should have anticipated that things wouldn’t end well for Song Ruhao‘s once he came into the deep palace. And now… it seems his pride has gotten the better of him.”

Yan Ge said, “I met him earlier and he asked me to speak a few good words for him in front of you.”

Huangfu Yuchen frowned, “Did you agree?”

“No,” Yan Ge said, “but after all, he is an elder of two dynasties and is your teacher, as well as the Crown Prince’s. It wouldn’t be appropriate to deny him face. However, I wouldn’t want to bring Song Ruhao with us.”

Huangfu Yuchen looked at his conflicted expression, smiled gently and pulled back the blanket. He hugged him tightly, and then wrapped him back in the blanket. “We won’t bring him. As for saving face, we can compensate Grand Tutor Song in other ways.”

“Since Grand Tutor Song is your teacher, if news of this spreads, won’t others think you are heartless? Should we bring him along?” Yan Ge continued his conflicting thoughts. “But, what if Song Ruhao tries some

tricks on the road, like getting you drunk, sending aphrodisiacs, blocking assassins' swords for you? Or even pretending to be seriously ill or hanging himself, staging a 'sacrifice'… That would be disastrous."

Huangfu Yuchen helplessly said, "How did you come up with all of this?"

"Didn't I tell you about the other world?" Yan Ge looked up at him. "It's all staged like that in the dramas."

"It will not to bring him," Huangfu Yuchen made a decisive and domineering decision, gently bumping his forehead against Yan Ge's. "You sit here, and I'll return to Tenglong Palace after finishing the plan."

Yan Ge lay on the fur blanket, struggled for a while, and then ran over to Huangfu Yuchen's side.

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at his bare feet, gave him a stern look, and then sat down with him on his lap.

"Eat this." After completing several side missions in the past few months, Yan Ge had received quite a number of rewards. He had actually forgotten about the Poison Immunity Pill he had obtained a long time ago, only remembering it just now. After confirming with Yan Jin, he learned that this Poison Immunity Pill not only neutralized toxins but also acted as an aphrodisiac antidote.

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at it without much interest and swallowed it, saying, "It's a bit bitter, what is it?"

"A poison," Yan Ge smirked.

Huangfu Yuchen remained calm and continued writing on the paper, "In that case, I should devour you before the poison takes effect, even if it means becoming a debauched ghost in death."

Yan Ge quickly said, "It's a Poison Immunity Pill. I've thought it over, and we should bring Song Ruhao along." If he dared to do anything, he would send him straight to the Cold Palace, putting an end to it once and for all.

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at him helplessly, “You just can’t be satisfied, can you?”

“Du Changzai should come too,” Yan Ge had his own plans, with Du Zhengfeng, a shadow guard, he would have a reliable ally. “Song Guiren is still ill, and Du Changzai’s rank is lower than his, so it’s only natural for him to take care of Song Guiren continuously.”

Du Zhengfeng, who was sitting in a warm room and dozing off, felt an inexplicable chill in his heart.

“It’s up to you,” Huangfu Yuchen conceded, he just had no way to argue with Yan Ge. However, he and Yan Ge had made significant progress in their cultivation, both reaching the mid-stage of the Enlightenment stage. Even the most formidable experts were not necessarily their opponents, so there was no need to worry about what Song Ruhao could do to them.

MCUS Chapter 78

After the snow melted, it became dry and cold, but the road was much easier to walk on. Before Yan Ge headed south, he took the time to return to the Yan Mansion. When he entered the main hall, he saw Yan Su sitting there with a grim face, while Madam Yan was trying to persuade him. Yan Xiaojing sat at the head seat, his expression equally serious.

“Father, Mother, Elder Brother.”

“You’re back.”

“What’s going on?” Yan Ge patted Yan Su’s shoulder.

Yan Su’s complexion eased a bit. “It’s nothing. Second Brother, since you’re back, stay for lunch. Let’s have a family meal together.”

Yan Ge cast a suspicious glance at the three of them. “We’re family. Is there something difficult that you can’t tell me?”

“Well…” Madam Yan spoke, “Su’er, it’s not a big deal to tell Ge’er about it.”

Yan Su nodded reluctantly.

Lady Yan pulled Yan Ge to sit down. “Since you’re the identity as the boss of the First Company boss was revealed and you were promoted to an honored position, the threshold has almost been trampled by matchmakers…”

Yan Ge was dumbfounded. “Our family… isn’t Elder Brother already married?”

Madam Yan said, “Silly child, our family doesn’t allow concubines. Do you think other families feel the same? Your status has risen, so your Elder Brother has become a coveted treasure. Almost every famous matchmaker in the capital has visited our house but we’ve sent them away. You’re busy enough on normal days, and your father and Elder Brother didn’t want you to worry about these trivial matters, so they didn’t tell you.”

“If they’ve been sent away, what’s the problem?” Yan Ge was still confused.

Madam Yan’s expression turned grave. “It’s still because of your sister-in-law. Before she entered our family, I was afraid she would worry that Su’er would take concubines in the future, so I specifically told her that our family doesn’t allow concubines, even if Su’er wants to bring in another woman, your father and I would never agree. At that time, she was still very happy. Who knew that today she would come to me and say that she wants to marry her cousin to your Elder Brother as a secondary wife. You can imagine how hurt Su’er is!”

A wave of anger surged in Yan Ge’s heart. Whether it was in the modern world or in this world, it was the first time he had heard of a wife actively requesting her husband to remarry. Back then, at the Hundred Flowers Festival, although he hadn’t spoken to the girl who was not yet his sister-in-law at the time, he could tell from the atmosphere between her and Yan Su that they were truly attracted to each other. In the subsequent visits home, he had witnessed Yan Su’s blissful appearance, indicating that they were deeply in love after marriage. How could things have changed so drastically in just a few months?

“Elder Brother, what exactly happened? Did something occur between you and sister-in-law that led her to do such a foolish thing?”

Yan Su sighed, feeling a chill in his heart. “Second Brother, it’s partly my fault. Your father and mother have had a harmonious marriage for decades, and I’ve always taken them as a role model. I thought that honesty is crucial between husband and wife, so I told her about the 10% bonus from Liuxian Pavilion that you secretly sent me as a congratulatory gift. I didn’t expect that a few days later, she would come and tell me that she has a cousin who

has been infatuated with me and suggested that I marry her as a secondary wife. Without my consent, that matchmaker came to our door today! Second Brother, do you know how I feel?”

Yan Ge fell silent, unable to comprehend the woman’s thought process. If your husband is wealthy, you should find ways to treat him better and keep him firmly by your side. Why would you invite someone to share your husband with you?

Madam Yan snorted softly. “Isn’t it because our Su’er has a considerable wealth and Ge’er is greatly favored? She fears that others might successfully squeeze a woman in, so she’d rather use her own cousin to cut off other people’s paths. It’s like the saying ‘Fertile water should not flow into someone else’s field’.”

Yan Ge gave his mother a thumbs up. She was sharp. After hearing her explanation, he immediately understood. If this were in the modern world, he would definitely advise Yan Su to get a divorce. But this was ancient times.

“Elder Brother, you have to make a decision about this matter. However, please be cautious. Our family has always lived harmoniously, so we shouldn’t let this issue disturb our household.”

Yan Su stood up. “Second Brother…”

——

Outside the Yan Mansion, Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi waited by the carriage, rubbing their hands to keep warm. Xiao Shuanzi stood with his hands Inserted into the sleeves of his padded jacket, stomping his feet for warmth. “Miss Xiang and Master Chunazi, why don’t you go into the carriage and warm yourselves by the brazzier? I’ll call for you when I see Young Master coming out.” Nowadays, his monthly allowance had increased to two taels, and his status had changed. Many people addressed him as “Brother Shuan.” But despite that, he remained as honest and reliable as before, gaining the trust of the Yan family.

“No need, let’s wait a little longer,” Wan Xiang said.

Before long, the three of them saw Yan Ge and Yan Su coming out one after the other., both of them with unpleasant expressions. Yan Ge said something with a cold face and angrily threw the hand stove, smashing it near Yan Su’s feet.

Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi were startled and hurried over. “Young Master! What happened? Please calm down.”

“From now on, I don’t have an elder brother,” Yan Ge said in a low voice.

“And I also don’t have you as my younger brother!” Yan Su’s anger was no less than his.

“You dare!” Xiao Chuanzi was furious.

“Let’s go!” Yan Ge coldly ordered, flicking his sleeve and turning to get into the carriage.

Yan Su also turned around and left.

“This—” Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi looked at each other in blank dismay.

Xiao Chuanzi stamped his foot. “Ah, the Young Master is really angry. Don’t let him harm himself. No, something big must have happened this time. I think I should go find Guard Feng and have him quickly inform the ‘Boss’.”

“Alright, you go find Guard Feng, and I’ll try to persuade the Young Master,” Wan Xiang said.

Wan Xiang entered the carriage but before she could say anything, Yan Ge coldly said, “No need to say anything.”

Wan Xiang knew the Young Master’s decisive personality and kept silent, sighing inwardly. She hoped the Emperor would persuade him when they returned to the palace.

On this day, Yan Ge showed no abnormalities at the company, but Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi knew he was forcing a smile.

In the evening, when they returned to Tenglong Palace, Yan Ge looked at the dining table set with his favorite dish—a steaming hot pot. After a moment's daze, he burst into laughter, almost unable to catch his breath.

"Did you go crazy?" Huangfu Yuchen originally wanted to cheer him up, but seeing him laughing, he immediately understood that the person who gave him the news must have misunderstood something. "Was there a situation in the Yan Mansion today?"

Suppressing his laughter, Yan Ge walked over and hugged him. They sat down side by side. "It's all because of that eccentric sister-in-law of mine! So, my elder brother and I put on a show. I'll be away for a few months this time, not going to the Yan Mansion for months. Those scheming people will think my elder brother and I have really fallen out, and they won't see my elder brother as a piece of fat meat anymore. Isn'tit brilliant! Manager Deng, quickly serve us rice. Hot pot is even more delicious when eaten with rice!"

"Yes!" Deng Mande saw that both masters were happy, so he was happy too. He promptly went to serve the rice.

By early March, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had finally dealt with all their affairs.

It was still dim outside when the people on the travel list gathered outside the palace gates, waiting in the cold wind, rubbing their hands silently, patiently awaiting the arrival of the emperor. The horses stood quietly, occasionally flicking their tails.

Minister Jiang Gan held the sleeping Yan Jin in his arms. Yan Jin was too young, and Jiang Gan worried about him falling ill due to the long journey. However, both masters liked Yan Jin, and he couldn't do anything about it.

***Yan Ge originally named the system “Yan Jin” but after it took on human form, it was named “Jiang Yanjin” after Prime Minister Wen(Jiang Gan), so he can still be called “Yan Jin”.**

Song Ruhao and Du Zhengfeng arrived together. Song Ruhao’s complexion was somewhat pale, but he was in good spirits. He occasionally glanced at the palace gate, and his thoughts were not hard to guess.

After a while, Huangfu Yuchen finally arrived, holding someone in his arms. Winter was the best time for sleep, and Yan Ge was soundly asleep. Huangfu Yuchen didn’t wake him up but directly wrapped him in a blanket and carried him.

Song Ruhao looked at Yan Ge with envy.

Gao Feng opened the curtain of the first carriage, and Huangfu Yuchen carried Yan Ge into the carriage. Deng Mande and palace maid Du Juan followed.

Song Ruhao and Du Zhengfeng sat in the second carriage, while Yan Jin, Jiang Gan, Song Chaobang, and Physician Zhang were in the third carriage. Yang Zhuo, Gao Feng, Gao Yun, and Yang Zhuo’s two subordinates, A Fei and Jun Xiang, rode on horses. The last carriage carried their luggage. The four coachmen were all skilled members of the Guard Escort. In total, the group consisted of nineteen people, which was quiet big. Not to mention that there were also several shadow guards in hiding.

The first carriage was specially built for this inspection tour. It was not only fortified with walls of copper and iron but also had ample space. Divided into two compartments, both were adorned with soft carpets, separated by a curtain.

The inner compartment had a long couch that served as a bed at night and a lounging area during the day. The outer compartment featured a small table and a charcoal stove, both securely fixed to the floor. There were also hanging cupboards on the walls, with small compartments to hold trinkets. Beneath the floor, there was a hidden compartment to store valuable and frequently used items. Although small, it possessed all necessary amenities. The other three carriages were also specially crafted, albeit not as lavish as the first one. They were simply sturdier and slightly larger than regular carriages.

Once they left the capital city, the state road proved to be less smooth than the city streets, causing some swaying of the carriages. Yan Ge woke up in a daze, realized he was on the carriage, and closed his eyes again, snuggling deeper into the Huangfu Yuchen's warm embrace, drifting back into a deep sleep.

Huangfu Yuchen pulled the blanket down slightly, allowing Yan Ge to breathe fresh air, and kissed his lips before closing his eyes.

It wasn't until the sun rose that the convoy stopped by the side of the road. Deng Mande and palace maid Du Juan led two coachmen to prepare breakfast. Yang Zhuo, A Fei, and Jun Xiang scouted the nearby area, ensuring there were no potential dangers. Jiang Gan, Song Chaobang, and Physician Zhang alighted from the carriage, stretching their bodies to loosen up.

Song Ruhao, still pretending to be ill, leaned towards the window and glanced around. Not seeing Huangfu Yuchen, he had no choice but to lie back down. Recovering so quickly after leaving the palace would raise suspicions.

Yan Ge woke up, and sprawled over Huangfu Yuchen lazily. He finally got up after having enough and pulled Huangfu Yuchen outside to breathe in the fresh air.

During the meal, Huangfu Yuchen spoke, "From this day forward, I am Young Master Fang Zhiyuan, a wealthy merchant from the north. Our journey south is to seek new business opportunities."

He looked at Yan Ge. “You are Madam Fang.”

Yan Ge widened his eyes, “I…”

Huangfu Yuchen acted as if he hadn’t heard and continued, “Yan Jin is our son Fang Shijie. Deng Mande is the steward Fang Sanfu. Grand Tutor Song and Minister Jiang are managers of the Fang family business, Master Song and Master Jiang: you can choose suitable pseudonyms for yourselves. Physician Zhang, you are Dr. Zhang. Yang Zhuo, Gao Feng, Gao Yun, A Fei, and Jun Xiang are the guards. Du Juan, the maid. Song Guiren, you are Master Song’s son, Young Master Song. Du Changzai, you are Young Master Song’s personal servant. Remember your roles and names well, and don’t make any mistakes.”

Everyone acknowledged, but Song Ruhao felt a bitter ache in his heart.

Yan Ge’s protests were in vain, and he resigned himself to his fate. He asked, “Does someone called Fang Zhiyuan exist?”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. “The identities of Fang Zhiyuan, Madam Fang, Fang Shijie, and Fang Sanfu are all genuine. We will be away for a considerable amount of time this time, and there may be significant developments. It’s better to be cautious.”

MCUS Chapter 79

Peach blossoms shimmer with radiance,

Countless paths adorned with fleeting splendor.

To witness the smiling forest in all its glory,

I ventured forth with the warm tree, not seeking return.

In the peak of March, as peach blossoms bloomed, the journey became a spectacle. Pink clouds floated, and the fragrant scent of flowers filled the air, bringing joy to the heart. However, even the most beautiful flowers become dull with prolonged observation. Especially for someone like Yan Ge, a caged bird who finally had the opportunity to venture outside, staying inside the carriage was unbearable.

At first, Huangfu Yuchen tried various ways to alleviate Yan Ge's boredom. They would let him feel the breeze from the carriage's shaft, go for a horse ride, or play chess together. But after trying all these options, Yan Ge became so bored he wanted to scratch the walls.

Huangfu Yuchen eventually gave up and let Yan Ge be.

Observing him became an amusing sight—sometimes he would prop his chin and daydream, other times he would gaze out of the window, and occasionally he would jump onto the roof of the carriage, sighing. He even made unsuccessful attempts at meditation, but it was all quite entertaining.

"Young Master, Madam, there is a sheltered mountain pass ahead, near a river. We shall camp there tonight," Yang Zhuo reported upon returning from scouting.

“Very well, make the arrangements,” Huangfu Yuchen replied.

Once the convoy came to a halt, everyone got to work—pitching tents, gathering firewood, fetching water, and preparing food. Song Chaobang and Physician Zhang didn’t want to idle and assisted in gathering firewood nearby.

It was the third day since they set out, and Song Ruhao had fully “recovered” from his illness. He roamed freely, gradually drawing closer to Huangfu Yuchen. Du Zhengfeng followed him closely.

“Why do you always follow me?” Song Ruhao asked.

“Young Master, I am your personal servant. If I don’t disturb you, please allow me to accompany you,” Du Zhengfeng dutifully played his role as a personal servant, his expression filled with deference. This made Song Ruhao feel powerless, wishing he could roar and say, ‘Brother, show some tact. Just because you don’t want to get close to the Emperor doesn’t mean others don’t!’

Song Chaobang shouted from a distance, “Little Du, come help me move this pile of firewood.”

Du Zhengfeng remained motionless, “You can ask A Fei to do it. I must attend to Young Master.”

A Fei quickly ran over and effortlessly lifted the pile of firewood.

Song Chaobang: “…”

“Papa!” Yan Jin ran to Yan Ge’s side. He wore a white fur cap, a red cotton robe, and a white fur-trimmed cotton jacket on top, resembling a round snowball. Jiang Gan cherished him and feared he would get sick, so he insisted on dressing him this way.

“Let’s go play by the river,” Yan Jin said.

“Okay,” Yan Ge held his hand.

Huangfu Yuchen followed along.

Yan Jin flashed a toothy smile at him, revealing an innocent expression. Of course, he didn't mind Huangfu Yuchen's constant presence with Yan Ge. The better Huangfu Yuchen treated Yan Ge, the faster Yan Ge would progress, and the more benefits he would receive.

What he minded was that throughout the journey, Huangfu Yuchen always left him in Minister Jiang Gan's carriage to have alone time with Yan Ge. Although he enjoyed acting like a child, there were times when he grew tired of it and wanted to act more mature.

Song Ruhao watched them, jealousy growing in his heart like wild grass in spring.

As the sun gradually set, the aroma of the two pots of hot soup and hot pot, cooked by Du Juan and Deng Mande, wafted through the cold evening breeze, making everyone salivate uncontrollably.

Deng Mande, Du Juan, the five guards, and four carriage drivers shared one large pot, specially prepared to accommodate them all. The remaining individuals shared the other pot, as there couldn't be too many luxuries while traveling.

Jiang Gan was afraid Yan Jin would burn himself, so he held him in his arms, feeding him while eating.

Yan Jin smiled blissfully, leaned in and kissed Jiang Gan's face with his oily lips and left a mark there, making Jiang Gan both amused and exasperated.

After dinner, as usual, they went for a walk. The lunar calendar indicated it was around the twelfth or thirteenth night, and the moonlight was enchanting. The shadows of the tree branches fell on the ground, swaying gently, creating a unique ambiance.

Huangfu Yuchen patted Yan Ge's belly and silently noted to eat less hot pot in the future. Every time they had hot pot, Yan Ge would overeat.

Song Ruhao glanced at the others, realizing that besides Du Zhengfeng, almost no one paid attention to him. He walked towards Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge, disregarding Yan Ge, who was busy picking flowers by their side.

“Can we chat for a moment?” Song Ruhao gazed at Huangfu Yuchen with earnestness.

Huangfu Yuchen remained silent, his expression stern, clearly indicating his disagreement.

The blunt attitude made Yan Ge delighted. He held Yan Jin’s hand, confidently saying, “Chen Chen, Little Jin and I are going to wash our hands by the river.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s brow twitched. Chen Chen?

‘Chen Chen?’ Song Ruhao’s jealousy almost exploded, but he struggled to compose himself and calmly said to Du Zhengfeng, “You can go ahead.”

Du Zhengfeng was worried that staying behind would raise suspicions from Song Ruhao, so he reluctantly turned and left.

Yan Jin looked at Yan Ge curiously, “Master, are you really letting them—”

Before he could finish his sentence, a white shadow appeared before him.

Yan Ge’s figure drifted over, like a white snowflake, silently landing on a wild peach tree not far from Huangfu Yuchen and Song Ruhao, secretly observing them.

Yan Jin looked up at the sky speechlessly.

Huangfu Yuchen looked at Song Ruhao and calmly asked, “What do you want to say?”

Song Ruhao’s eyes shimmered with a mixture of sadness and longing. His eyes shining under the moonlight as he said, “Since the day I understood

the meaning of ‘liking,’ I have known that I like you. Do you not have any feelings for me?” He approached Huangfu Yuchen.

Yan Ge wrinkled his nose from the tree.

Huangfu Yuchen took a few steps to the side and indifferently replied, “We have always been good friends.”

“What aspect of mine is inferior to his?” Song Ruhao passionately pursued.

“Comparison has never been made, nor is it necessary.”

Yan Ge’s face flushed. Was Huangfu Yuchen implying that he was unique in his heart?

“That’s enough.” Huangfu Yuchen turned to look at Song Ruhao. “I have given you enough time.”

Song Ruhao felt a chill spread through his body. He stared at Huangfu Yuchen for a long time but received no response. He could only bow and turn away, his departing figure carrying a hint of madness.

“Aren’t you coming down?” Huangfu Yuchen looked up.

His smile under the moonlight was truly captivating. Yan Ge leaped down from the tree, smiling at him without saying a word.

“Let’s go.” Huangfu Yuchen took his hand.

“Where are we going?”

“For a walk.” Huangfu Yuchen turned to look at him. “Or do you feel like lazing around today?”

Yan Ge shook his head, gripping his hand tightly.

After they crawled into bed at night, Yan Ge initiated a deep and lingering kiss with Huangfu Yuchen, then nestled in his arms and closes his eyes to sleep. His dependant appearance softened Huangfu Yuchen’s heart, and he

held him tightly as if he were holding a priceless treasure, afraid that it would be taken away.

The night grew darker, and despite the serene night sky, dozens of dark figures emerged from all four directions, swiftly surrounding the camp.

Yang Zhuo, who was on night watch, suddenly opened his eyes, his sharp gaze even more piercing in the glow of the campfire. He immediately leaped to his feet.

Gao Feng, Gao Yun, A Fei, and Jun Xiang were only lightly asleep and immediately awakened. The five of them positioned themselves around the three tents. After a few exchanges, the four carriage drivers, who could only rest at night, were also awakened and joined the fray.

Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge opened their eyes alertly but remained lying down, listening to the commotion outside. After nearly a stick of incense burning, the sounds of the fight had not ceased.

Yan Ge rose to his feet and exclaimed, “They are skilled.”

The two of them stepped out of the tent, each holding a sword. With a single glance, their expressions turned serious. The assailants all wore identical black masks and black attire, indicating that they were more than mere bandits.

Minister Jiang Gan and the others had also been awakened, but they had no martial arts skills. They huddled together, remaining silent, afraid of interfering with Yang Zhuo and the others. Du Zhengfeng pretended not to possess any martial arts skills, while Yan Jin had been strictly instructed by Yan Ge not to reveal his abilities unless absolutely necessary.

Yang Zhuo and his companions had already killed three assailants, but facing fifteen opponents while protecting the tents behind them made the battle extremely difficult.

Yan Ge was about to draw his sword when one of the black-clad assailants glanced in their direction, pausing slightly on him and Huangfu Yuchen. He

exchanged a subtle gesture with his two subordinates, and the three of them attacked simultaneously. Two faced Yang Ge, while one confronted Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen’s eyes darkened, and his strikes became faster and fiercer.

Song Ruhao also noticed that these people were clearly targeting Yan Ge. Although he didn’t know why, a surge of wild joy filled his heart, followed by a dark thought: Could he take advantage of this opportunity to get rid of Yan Ge? If Yan Ge hadn’t deceived the emperor, the person the emperor favored would surely be him!

These mysterious people were all highly skilled in martial arts. The battle grew increasingly intense, and as the fight spread and approached Jiang Gan and the others, they screamed and scattered to avoid them.

Yan Ge combined his Flowing Sand Sword technique with his true qi, sweeping his sword horizontally and cutting the neck of one of the black-clad assailants. The man instantly went limp and fell to the ground lifeless. The other assailant was their leader- he didn’t even spare a glance at the fallen body. With a whistle, two more people leaped out from the nearby battle and joined forces with him.

Huangfu Yuchen was about to go and assist when Yan Ge gave him a restraining look, causing him to furrow his brows and halt his steps.

The three assailants simultaneously executed the “besiege from all side” technique, attacking Yan Ge from three different directions. Yan Ge swiftly evaded, ending up standing in front of Song Ruhao.

Song Ruhao’s hand slowly reached towards Yan Ge’s back, and his heart nearly jumped out of his chest. But before he could make up his mind, Yan Ge had already leaped away.

A profound sense of regret filled Song Ruhao’s heart. He had missed such a perfect opportunity. If only he had been resolute from the beginning.

Unbeknownst to him, a pair of sharp eyes watched his every move, the owner of those eyes put back the concealed weapon in their right hand.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun heard Huangfu Yuchen's voice transmission in their minds.

"You two have traveled the martial world. Can you discern their martial arts style?"

"In response to Your Majesty, it appears to be a style from Nanmo."

"As expected." Huangfu Yuchen acted decisively, his sword aura dazzling as he swiftly defeated two assailants, then darted to Yan Ge's side, piercing the heart of another black-clad assailant.

Seeing that the situation had become unfavorable, the leader let out a whistle and hastily fled with the remaining two.

Huangfu Yuchen commanded, "Pursue! Make sure to capture one alive!"

The Imperial Guards moved upon hearing his order.

Huangfu Yuchen looked furious and Yan Ge asked cautiously, "Are these people somehow special?"

The others also approached, wearing expressions of curiosity.

Huangfu Yuchen replied, "If my guess is correct, these people belong to a mysterious organization that emerged five years ago. This organization is known for targeting wealthy merchants and nobles, showing no regard for the laws and regulations of the court. They never give up until they achieve their goals, and so far, no one they have set their sights on has been able to escape. The previous emperor made great efforts to deal with this organization but failed to eradicate it. Since this organization has no official name, people have taken to calling it 'Centipede' because a centipede can die but can never fall down."

He embraced Yan Ge's waist. "Just now, I noticed that they specifically targeted Little Ge. It's highly suspicious. Could it be that they know Little

Ge’s true identity?”

Jiang Gan said, “Madam is in disguise. It shouldn’t be so easy for the true identity to be exposed. Nowadays, everyone knows about the love between the Young Master and Madam. If Madam is exposed, it would be the same as exposing you, Master.”

Song Chaobang’s expression tightened. “Young Master, do you think we should cancel this southern expedition?”

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Yan Ge shook his head. “You should all remember that on the day of departure, Young Master did not notify you in advance. Instead, he sent someone to pick you up at the palace gate at the last minute to prevent any leaks. We haven’t noticed anyone passing on information along the way, nor have we detected any pursuers. It seems that the Young Master’s journey south is still a secret.” This situation is indeed strange, and he couldn’t figure it out for a while.

Song Chaobang felt relieved. “Madam’s analysis makes sense.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Centipede will not rest until it reaches its goal. They will definitely take action again. Little Ge, you must be more careful from now on. If you want to go somewhere, I’ll accompany you. No more sneaking away alone.”

“I understand,” Yan Ge said. “They have suffered losses in manpower, so they probably won’t return soon.”

Huangfu Yuchen instructed his subordinates to bury the deceased coachman (who was actually a skilled member of the Imperial Guards) on the spot. After offering a few cups of wine as a tribute, they returned to their tents. Just as they lay down, someone lightly tapped on the tent’s fabric three times.

“It’s Deng Mande,” Huangfu Yuchen whispered to Yan Ge, lifting the curtain.

Deng Mande entered and spoke softly, “Reporting to the Young Master, Little Du just came to report that when Madam fought with the assailants earlier, Song Ruhao almost reached out to push Madam.”

“Outarageous!” Huangfu Yuchen erupted in anger.

Yan Ge remained calm. “Your anger won’t help. Even if you question him, if he doesn’t admit it, what can you do?”

“He has gone mad. Little Ge, I can’t continue to let you have your way,” Huangfu Yuchen took out a small jade box, about the size of a wine cup, from his sleeve and handed it to Deng Made. “Find an opportunity to put the contents inside in his food. Since he is prone to illness, let him continue to suffer.”

“Understood,” Deng Mande replied.

Yan Ge opened his mouth.

“Stay quiet,” Huangfu Yuchen embraced him and warned as they lay down.

Yan Ge obediently stayed silent, ready to sleep.

Well, if he’s sick, let him stay sick. It’s better to avoid trouble. As for sending him to the cold palace or anything like that, he’ll see when the opportunity arises.

The night passed without incident.

Early the next morning, the Imperial Guards who had pursued the black-clad individuals returned empty-handed. Huangfu Yuchen had already anticipated that the black-clad individuals wouldn’t be so easy to deal with, so he didn’t hold the guards accountable but instead ordered them to be more cautious in the future.

On the second carriage, Song Ruhao lay weakly on the couch, while Song Chaobang sat by his side, sighing with concern. “You, child, why do you keep falling ill?”

Song Ruhao replied, “Perhaps I caught a cold carelessly last night.”

Du Zhengfeng was sitting on the carriage shaft so he could hear their conversation.

Song Chaobang said, “Your health is really weak. If only you had learned martial arts back then.”

Song Ruhao fell silent. In his childhood, he didn’t want to learn martial arts because he was afraid of the hardships. Later, he didn’t want to learn martial arts because he loved Huangfu Yuchen and didn’t want his body to become hard from training. It was difficult to give say such a reason to his father.

“Father, don’t worry. Doctor Zhang gave me medicine, and I’ll be fine after a few days of rest.”

Song Chaobang glanced at the curtain. “Then focus on recovering. You must get better before we reach our destination; otherwise, you won’t have a chance to explore around.”

Song Ruhao nodded. “Don’t worry.”

As the warm sun began to set, Yang Zhuo rode up to the side of the carriage. “Reporting to the Young Master and Madam, it’s getting late, and ahead is Shuangque County. I think we need to hurry to reach the city before nightfall.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Accelerate.”

“Understood.” Yang Zhuo shouted to the carriage drivers, “Increase the speed!”

The carriages picked up their pace, and the sound of horse hooves echoed as they raced towards the distance.

Huangfu Yuchen moved closer to someone who was becoming bored and on the verge of falling asleep, embracing them in his arms. “Shuangque County is surrounded by mountains, so there are many birds. Especially in spring, you can often witness the magnificent scene of birds singing in unison. We’ll stay in Shuangque County for a day tomorrow.”

Yan Ge's interest was piqued. "Just thinking about it, I can imagine how magnificent that scene must be. It makes me wonder what new attractions we could add to the amusement park!"

Huangfu Yuchen shook his head inwardly. Could this be what Yan Ge referred to as his 'occupational disease? Anyway, as long as he was no longer bored, it didn't matter what he did.

Yan Ge's eyes gleamed with excitement, his face deep in thought. Huangfu Yuchen didn't disturb him and instead leaned against the carriage wall, allowing Yan Ge to lie comfortably in his lap.

After another hour of swift travel, the city gate came into view in the distance.

The people in the carriages became slightly excited. They had hardly stopped on the road, even having their lunch inside the carriages to save time.

However, the dilapidated city wall made everyone feel uncertain. The convoy slowed down its pace, approaching the city slowly and steadily.

Four guards stationed at the city gate perked up upon seeing the approaching carriages.

"Brothers, looks like we have some money to collect!"

Two guards extended their long spears, blocking the path of the carriages.

Yang Zhuo raised his hand, signaling the convoy to stop.

"What can we do for you, brothers?" he asked.

One of the guards chuckled and reached out his hand. "Toll fee."

To avoid affecting the mood of his masters, Yang Zhuo didn't inquire further. "How much?"

The guard raised an eyebrow and glanced back. “Four carriages, one tael of silver each, totaling four taels.”

“Are you robbing us?” Gao Yun angrily retorted. They had encountered bandits looking for easy gains along the road, but being robbed by guards was a first.

Another older guard glanced at him indifferently. “If you don’t want to enter the city, stand aside.”

A deep and magnetic voice resonated from the first carriage. “Give it to him.”

Only then did Yang Zhuo take out four taels of silver and hand them to the guard.

The younger guard’s eyes lit up upon seeing the silver ingots. He was about to ask for more when the older guard pulled at his sleeve. The guards protecting the carriages had a fierce demeanor, unlike ordinary escorts, so it would be wise to stop while they were ahead.

The convoy was finally allowed to enter the city.

The young guard asked the older guard with confusion, “Uncle Chen, why did you stop me? These people are obviously wealthy.”

Uncle Chen glanced at him, his gaze steady. “Boy, learn a bit more. Look at those people riding on horses, each with a straight posture. Do they look like ordinary folks?”

The young guard shrank his neck in fear. “So, they won’t come back to trouble us now that we’ve been given the silver, right?”

“If they didn’t want to quarrel with us, they wouldn’t have given us the silver. Don’t worry. Keep your eyes open next time,” Uncle Chen replied.

Inside the now-distant carriage, Huangfu Yuchen instructed Gao Feng, “Go and investigate the magistrate of Shuangque County.”

“Yes.”

Yan Ge peered out of the window, his face displaying an incredulous expression.

When Huangfu Yuchen had told him about the bustling scene of birdsong in Shuangque County, he had subconsciously assumed that it would be a prosperous town. However, the dilapidated houses and sparse pedestrians on the streets told him otherwise.

To put it bluntly, it was a broken-down city.

As the carriage passed a food stall, he witnessed a bowl of plain broth without a hint of oil floating on the surface. The owner expressionlessly placed the bowl on the table, without a word, while the customer silently picked up their chopsticks to eat. Everything seemed lifeless. Only a few sparse wild grasses poking through the cracks in the stone pavement showed a hint of vitality.

They had already traveled for five or six days, passing through three towns. Although the other two towns were not as bustling as the capital, they were lively during the day. This was the first rundown town they encountered. It was clearly abnormal. Surrounded by mountains, Shuangque County should have ample resources and the potential for development.

Huangfu Yuchen remained calm, his emotions hidden as he called Gao Yun and said in a deep voice, “Investigate.”

“Yes.”

Yan Ge grasped Huangfu Yuchen’s hand. “When something goes wrong, there must be a demon.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. “Gao Feng.”

Gao Feng quickly rode over. “Young Master.”

“You and Gao Yun have escorted jewelry to the south multiple times. Have you heard anything unusual about this place?” Huangfu Yuchen asked.

Gao Feng replied, “I haven’t heard anything. The Longfeng Escort Agency usually transports the jewellery via the waterway and bypasses Shuangque County. First, it’s faster by water. Second, there are fewer bandits on the water.”

“Arrange accommodations first,” Huangfu Yuchen added.

“Yes, Young Master.”

Throughout the journey, A Fei took charge of scouting ahead whenever they entered a town. He quickly returned and led the convoy to a prominent inn, explaining, “This is the best inn in the city.”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen looked at the drowsy innkeeper and the three or four staff members chatting together in the hall, silently speechless.

Jiang Gan and the others noticed Huangfu Yuchen’s bad mood and didn’t dare to say much.

The innkeeper and staff members showed a slight hint of delight upon seeing the guests, but it was not too much.

Deng Mande went to handle the check-in and instructed the innkeeper to prepare dinner.

Gao Feng had an ordinary face, so he went to chat with the staff members and gather information. However, their responses were evasive, as if there were deep secrets, and he couldn’t gather any useful information.

It was not until Gao Yun returned that they learned the truth. It turned out that the terrain was the issue.

Shuangque County has always been relatively prosperous, but two years ago, a group of bandits took notice of the strategic location of the Sanzhu Mountain outside the city and established the Black Demon Lair. Coincidentally, the county magistrate, Shen, who was afraid of trouble, took office at the same time.

Shuangque County was almost controlled by these bandits. They would come down from the mountain every ten days or so to collect protection fees, making it difficult for the people to make a living. As a result, the once lively Shuangque County became lifeless. It was said that the group of bandits had grown to over a thousand members, and the timid county magistrate dare not resist, waiting for his three-year term to end so he could leave. Not only that, he actively urged the county residents to pay the protection fees, fearing to anger the bandits. The county magistrate was a coward, and the officials below grew bold, occasionally enjoying themselves by collecting tolls and indulging in feasts.

Huangfu Yuchen's face turned livid upon hearing this, and even Yan Ge was furious. As the saying goes, "If officials don't act in the best interest of the people, they might as well go home and sell sweet potatoes!" What was the use of officials who only knew how to eat and do nothing?

Song Chaobang exclaimed, "Such corrupt officials must be severely punished!"

"Indeed, they must be dealt with," Huangfu Yuchen smiled coldly. "Since my ascension, I haven't made any moves yet, so targeting this county magistrate wouldn't be a bad start."

Jiang Gan asked, "Your Majesty, what is your plan?"

Huangfu Yuchen said, "Yang Zhou, arrange for someone to gather information about these bandits. Isn't this County Magistrate Shen afraid of death? He shouldn't leave his position unscathed. Think carefully about how we can make him personally go up the mountain to eliminate the bandits, to let him know that the court cannot be easily fooled."

The deepness in his eyes made Jiang Gan, Song Chaobang, and the others feel awe. Whoever said the new emperor was weak and easily deceived would undoubtedly receive a slap in the face.

After discussing official matters, Yan Ge spoke up, "Alright, let's eat. The food will be cold soon. Only when we are full will we have the energy to think."

At night, Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge lay in bed together. Huangfu Yuchen listened to Yan Ge's breathing gradually becoming calm and steady. Then he gently pecked Yan Ge's lips and carefully lifted the covers, putting on his clothes before getting out of bed. He attentively arranged the covers again and sat down at the table, setting up the paper and picking up a pen. After pondering for a moment, he swiftly wrote.

"Shuangque County—"

Yan Ge opened his eyes, quietly watching Huangfu Yuchen's figure. A warm smile gradually appeared on his lips.

Such a man, who is not only a considerate lover but also a responsible leader to his subjects, was unexpectedly his. Perhaps he should do even more than what he had originally planned.

The night breeze blew in through the gap in the window paper, gently swaying the candle flame, and Huangfu Yuchen's shadow danced along with it.

Yan Ge's consciousness gradually blurred, and then he fell into a deep sleep.

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As Yan Ge slowly opened his eyes, Huangfu Yuchen leaned over and kissed his lips. “Awake? If you don’t get up now, you’ll miss today’s arrangement.”

“What arrangement?” Yan Ge scrutinized his complexion, suspecting that he hadn’t slept at all last night.

Huangfu Yuchen kissed his fingers and handed him his clothes. “The rare spectacle of hundreds of birds singing in unison can still be witnessed. There’s a man in the county known for his obsession with birds. He used to be a wealthy man, but since the disappearance of the county’s birds, he has spent all his wealth building a garden that attracts various birds throughout the year. It is the only place in the county where you can see hundreds of birds singing together.”

Yan Ge asked, “Aren’t you supposed to be dealing with the bandit lair?”

Huangfu Yuchen casually replied, “What do you think I brought the Prime Minister and the Grand Tutor for? They will handle it.”

Yan Ge didn’t expose him. He wanted to see the sight of hundreds of birds singing together first, and Yang Zhuo and the others probably hadn’t figured out the situation at Sanzhu Mountain yet.

He hooked his arm around Huangfu Yuchen’s neck and playfully kissed his lips before getting up with a smile.

Seeing his good mood, Huangfu Yuchen’s mood also improved. He opened the door and instructed the servants to bring breakfast.

After having breakfast, Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, Yan Jin, Jiang Gan, Grand Tutor Song, Gao Feng, and Gao Yun followed Deng Mande outside. Deng Mande held a simple map in his hand. As for Song Ruhao, he was still ill and wouldn't appear in front of everyone for a while.

Shuangque County was slightly more lively than yesterday in the morning. The sight of villagers carrying loads and children playing and running around added some liveliness to the county.

"Young Master, Madam, it's just ahead."

The group entered a secluded and narrow alley and stopped at a crimson door. Green branches from the wall gently swayed, as if greeting them. Various bird calls emanated from inside the door, crisp and pleasant, rejuvenating to the spirit.

Deng Mande stepped forward and knocked on the door, and an old man answered.

The old man, around fifty years old, had an air of scholarly elegance. He was thin in stature, but his spirit was vibrant. He stroked his gray beard and appraised the group. His pant legs were rolled up, and there was mud on his shoes, indicating that he had been busy in the fields just now.

"Old Master Fan, we've heard if you and have come to admire the birds. Apologies for the disturbance." Huangfu Yuchen stopped Deng Mande, who had just taken out a silver ingot, and handed him a fifty-taels silver ingot instead.

Old Master Fan calmly accepted it, opened the door, and let them in. "Since you've given it, I'll accept it, young master."

Huangfu Yuchen said, "Old Master, please accept it without worry. I've heard that you've spent a considerable amount to maintain this garden and have almost lived outdoors. It's worthy of admiration. This silver are just a small token of appreciation."

Old Master Fan appraised Huangfu Yuchen and nodded. “Hmm, you’re a thoughtful young man. You will undoubtedly achieve great things in the future.” He inexplicably had an air of an otherworldly expert.

Yan Ge chuckled inwardly, wondering how Old Master Fan would react if he knew that the person he praised was the emperor.

He took out a one-hundred-taels silver note and intentionally overshadowed Huangfu Yuchen. Of course, the real reason was that he had more money than Huangfu Yuchen and could afford to donate more. Huangfu Yuchen also had money, but most of it belonged to the state, not to him personally.

“Old Master, this is my token of appreciation.”

If anyone else dared to overshadow the emperor, it would undoubtedly be a capital offense. Yan Ge was the only exception. Song Chaobang, Jiang Gan, and the others had seen enough of Huangfu Yuchen’s indulgence along the way and were already numb to it, not even blinking an eye.

Sure enough, Huangfu Yuchen glanced indulgently at Yan Ge.

The old man looked at Yan Ge and took the silver note, saying, “You, young man, are lively and spirited. You are bound to live a long life.”

Yan Ge: “…”

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled lightly and pinched the back of Yan Ge’s neck.

As they ventured deeper into the garden, the dense tree canopy blocked the sun, and the temperature dropped slightly. However, the birdsong gradually increased, some low and resonant, some high-pitched, some rugged, some clear, some short and rhythmic like drumbeats, and some long and melodic as if beckoning. When they all came together, it created a marvelous symphony, a feast for the ears, evoking admiration and nostalgia. Looking up, several warblers were vying for warm trees, and newly arrived swallows were gathering mud for their nests. Orioles, cuckoos, wild geese, red-billed blue magpies, parrots, white doves, swifts… whether black, yellow, blue, solitary, dancing in groups, small or with gigantic bodies, they shuttled

through the emerald branches, appearing and disappearing. With a rough estimate, there were at least a hundred birds in their field of vision.

However, occasionally, a bird dropping would fall from above, spoiling the scenery.

Huangfu Yuchen keenly caught sight of a dropping heading towards Yan Ge's head and quickly extended his arm to block it, then he casually took the handkerchief that Deng Mande handed over to him to wipe off the dirt from his sleeve.

Yan Ge smiled with curved eyes and secretly squeezed Huangfu Yuchen's hand.

As they continued walking, the density of trees slightly decreased, and they came across the only building since entering the courtyard—a pair of small wooden houses surrounded by the vast garden. In front of the houses was an open space with several plots of lush green vegetables.

The old man extended his finger to his mouth and let out a whistle. The birds in the woods immediately began to chirp cheerfully, their voices dense and intertwined, like a joyful melody. The branches swayed with their flight, making a rustling sound, and the entire forest seemed to come alive!

What a spectacle of birdsong!

One could imagine the vibrant scene if the Black Demon Bandits hadn't taken up residence in Shuangque County!

Thinking of this, both Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen felt a sense of regret and a deep disgust towards the Black Demon Bandits.

The old man extended his right arm, and in a moment, several daring birds landed and hopped on his arm, chirping and chattering as if conversing with him.

"Birds are creatures with spiritual essence. Treat them well, and they will treat you well."

Huangfu Yuchen extended his hand and concentrated a thread of spiritual energy in his palm. Parrots were especially sensitive to spiritual energy so some leaped lightly and landed in his cupped hand, curiously looking up at him. He extended his hand towards Yan Ge.

Yan Ge reached out his hand, placing it next to Huangfu Yuchen's hand, and replicated the same process, condensing an even denser spiritual energy than Huangfu Yuchen. The parrot turned its head to look at him and walked lightly on his palm.

The two exchanged a smile.

The sweet atmosphere made the others feel superfluous. They shifted their gaze, some looking up at the sky, some looking down at the ground.

Fortunately, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen remembered the occasion and dissipated the spiritual energy. The peony parrot flapped its wings and flew back into the woods.

Jiang Gan asked, "This is a good place. I heard there are bandits lurking around here. Won't those bandits cause trouble in this area?"

Old Master Fan chuckled, "They seek wealth. What wealth do I have here? Only birds. If they want to see birds, aren't there more birds in the mountains?"

After strolling through the garden and enjoying the sights of countless birds, they finally left.

Before departing, Yan Ge said, "Old master, perhaps we will come again."

Old Master Fan smiled and replied, "Feel free to come."

Not long after returning to the inn, Yang Zhuo and A Fei, who had gone to investigate the situation at Sanzhu Mountain, returned covered in dust.

Du Juan swiftly poured them a cup of warm tea.

Huangfu Yuchen said to Yan Ge, “Madam, I heard that the fried noodles in the county have a unique flavor. Why not taste something fresh?”

“Alright.” Yan Ge got up and left.

Du Juan and Gao Feng followed.

Ah Fei said, “Young Master, we have almost figured out the situation. Sanzhu Mountain consists of three main peaks, which is how it got its name. It is almost parallel to another neighboring mountain, with a narrow passage in between. The terrain is steep and treacherous, with numerous natural obstacles. It’s easy to defend but difficult to attack. They not only rob the locals but also ambush travelers passing through here. It’s not feasible to pass through this area, as one would have to detour over a hundred miles and cross a mountain. Initially, the government dispatched troops to eradicate the Black Demon Bandits, but as soon as the soldiers approached, the sentries on the mountaintop discovered them. The entire group then escapes, leaving behind an empty stronghold, only to return after the troops had withdrawn. The population of the Black Demon Lair has now exceeded a thousand people, with five leaders in total. The first leader, Da Dao, is skilled in using broadswords and is known as Broadsword Sister. The second leader is skilled in using axes and is called Er Fu. The third leader is skilled in swords and is known as San Jian. The fourth leader is skilled in spears and is called Fourth Spear, and the fifth leader is skilled in clubs and is called Wu Gun. Their names correspond to their respective weapons. It is said that all five of them are formidable experts and difficult to deal with.”

*Er Fu — Second Axe, San Jian — Third Sword, Si Qian — Fourth Spear, Wu Gun — Fifth Club.

“Do you know anything about the backgrounds of these five leaders?” Huangfu Yuchen asked.

Yang Zhuo replied, “To avoid arousing suspicion, we didn’t dare venture deep into the Black Demon Lair. However, we have memorized the appearance of the five leaders. Additionally, the second leader seemed familiar; he should be a wanted figure in the martial world.”

Jiang Gan said, “Over a thousand people. Even if the county were to send troops to eliminate them, they wouldn’t have enough manpower.”

Song Chaobang asked, “Has the county magistrate reported this situation to the prefect?”

Yang Zhuo replied, “The county magistrate intended to report it to the prefect, but the Black Demon Bandits threatened him, leaving him too frightened to act!”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “You were tasked with finding a way to force the county magistrate to take the initiative in dealing with the bandits. Have you come up with a plan?”

Jiang Gan looked at Song Chaobang and, seeing that he had no intention of speaking, said, “May I ask, Young Master, do you want to take this opportunity to get rid of County Magistrate Shen or merely scare him?”

Huangfu Yuchen sneered and raised an eyebrow, “If we eliminate him while suppressing the bandits, the court will have to reward him. That would be too advantageous for him. We’ll just scare him and give him a profound lesson before investigating him.”

Jiang Gan said, “In that case, I have a plan, but I’m not sure if it’s feasible.”

“Tell us.” Huangfu Yuchen urged.

Jiang Gan said, “I remember Ah Fei mentioned that County Magistrate Shen, in his old age, finally had a son. He treats him like a precious gem, holding him in his hands and fearing that he might disappear if he lets go.

We can pretend to be members of the Black Demon Bandits and take away his son, demanding County Magistrate Shen to bring fifty thousand taels of silver to a designated location within a day to redeem his child. County Magistrate Shen has only been in office for two years, and even if he intended to exploit the people's wealth, it would be impossible for him to accumulate fifty thousand taels of wealth with 'boss' of the Black Demon Bandits present. Even if he were to borrow, he wouldn't be able to gather this sum within a single day. If he wants to save his son, he will have no choice but to lead troops up the mountain. He is an extremely fearful individual, and he will surely bring all the military forces from the county with him. At that time, we can continue pretending to be members of the Black Demon Bandits and frighten him…"

Everyone in the room looked at him with peculiar eyes. As expected of Minister Wen, he truly deserved to be called an old fox, as he could come up with such a devious plan.

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Jiang Gan remained indifferent, regardless of whether the plan was cunning or not, as long as it worked.

Huangfu Yuchen did not object, “Guard Yang, you shall handle this matter.”

“Yes.”

“Now that Shen Jinzhong’s matter is essentially resolved, it is imperative to eradicate the bandits of the Black Demon Lair. Do any of you have brilliant strategies?” Huangfu Yuchen asked.

Jiang Gan spoke, “If the previous method is employed skillfully, perhaps it may yield other remarkable effects. We can take advantage of the dim twilight and pretend to kill Shen Jinzhong’s son. Overwhelmed by grief and fury, Shen Jinzhong will undoubtedly develop a deeper hatred towards the Black Demon Bandits. He will surely transform his sorrow into strength, racking his brains to devise strategies to eliminate the bandits. Perhaps he will personally lead troops up the mountain.”

Everyone: “…”

“Father is truly remarkable!” Yan Jin praised Jiang Gan with a thumbs up.

Receiving his son’s admiration, Jiang Gan grew more excited. “If this method proves ineffective, there are other alternatives. Firstly, we can report to the prefect, urging the governor to dispatch more soldiers to eliminate the criminals. Secondly, the young master can send someone to capture the leaders of the bandits. By capturing the five ringleaders, the Black Demon Bandits will crumble like loose sand, making their eradication easier. Thirdly, through a strategy of division, we can sow discord among the five leaders, causing them to fall apart individually.

However, this plan will take a considerable amount of time and requires a certain understanding of the personalities of the five leaders.”

The others silently vowed never to offend Jiang Gan in the future.

“Father, you’re amazing!” Yan Jin threw himself into Jiang Gan’s embrace.

Several people, including Song Chaobang, chuckled, believing that Yan Jin didn’t truly comprehend what was being said.

Without hesitation, Huangfu Yuchen made a decision. “Although the second method would yield quicker results, we will proceed with the first approach — reporting to the prefect. The court doesn’t maintain such a substantial military force just to feed them. Jun Xiang, take the imperial order and make your way to the prefectural yamen. The Black Demon Bandits have been in Shuangque County for two years, and the prefect must have heard some rumors, but there hasn’t been any action. There might be some issues involved. If the prefect tries to evade responsibility or handles the matter lightly, then present the imperial order to him.”

“Yes.” Jun Xiang received the token and departed. After a while, the sound of fading horse hooves could be heard from outside the inn.

“Let’s go out together, assess the public sentiment, and determine how Shuangque County can recover its economic development after dealing with the bandits.”

The group followed Huangfu Yuchen as they walked outside, all unconsciously thinking of Yan Ge. With the God of Wealth by their side, why should they bother coming up with solutions?

Huangfu Yuchen noticed their thoughts and his gaze became cold. “He is my beloved, not my subordinate. If you’ve had enough of your black hats, I can fulfill your wishes.”

“We dare not, Your Highness.”

The group casually strolled along the street.

Song Chaobang, as an elder of the previous dynasty and the Grand Tutor of the Crown Prince, possessed true wisdom. After contemplating for a moment, he spoke, “I have thought about Yan Guiren’s business model, and regardless of the trade, novelty is always the defining characteristic. Can Shuangque County draw inspiration from this?”

Jiang Gan took the conversation, “If you talk about the characteristics of Shuangque County, it must be the birds.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, “We all seem to be thinking along the same lines. How exactly can we make use of birds?”

Song Chaobang suggested, “Perhaps we can organize a grand event, similar to the Hundred Flowers Festival in the capital, where we capture more birds and attract tourists.”

“Or we can simply hold a beauty pageant for birds?” Deng Mande eagerly offered another suggestion.

While the officials debated fervently, Yan Ge leisurely strolled along the streets, occasionally entering shops to browse. Gao Feng and Du Juan silently followed.

Since the Black Demon Bandits settled in Sanzhu Mountain, young people with ambitions sought opportunities elsewhere. The sons of wealthy families no longer dared to be arrogant in front of bandits and had become quiet, so young and handsome men were rarely seen in the county anymore. Passersby couldn’t help but cast more glances at Yan Ge, secretly admiring him. Young girls blushed when they caught a glimpse of him.

In a bamboo shop, an elderly man in his fifties sat on a small stool woven from bamboo, skillfully weaving a bamboo basket with his calloused but agile hands.

Yan Ge walked over and examined the bamboo products in the shop. There were fish baskets, backpack baskets, straw hats, bamboo lanterns, bamboo baskets, bamboo chairs, vegetable baskets, bamboo mats, bamboo sieves, and more. The craftsmanship was exquisite and sturdy.

“Old master, your skills are impressive. May I ask how long it takes to weave a bamboo item?”

The old man chuckled with pride and set aside his work. He gestured with his hands, “It takes burning an incense stick to weave a bamboo basket of this size. The joints in our bamboo products are all hidden, so they won’t prick your hands or back, not even when you sit on them. Young master, feel free to pick whatever you like.”

Yan Ge smiled gently, “I have looked at them, and they are indeed skillfully woven. However, the county is currently facing economic difficulties, and there are already many bamboo shops in the county. The competition is fierce, and I’m afraid they can’t make much profit each day.”

“There’s nothing we can do about that.” The old man sighed deeply and continued, “As the saying goes, we rely on mountains to eat, and we rely on water to drink. The county is abundant In bamboo, and the craftsmanship of bamboo weaving has been passed down from the older generation. We can’t just let it disappear.”

Yan Ge nodded, “Old man, you make a valid point. The skills of the older generation are indeed a form of wealth that needs to be passed down. I do need some bamboo items, but what I want is not available here. Can you weave them for me?”

The old man looked at him curiously, “The bamboo items here are the most comprehensive in the county. What is it that you want? Just tell me, and I can weave it.”

Yan Ge called out, “Du Juan.”

Du Juan opened the small bag she carried on her shoulder and took out a pen and a notebook bound with white paper, handing them to Yan Ge.

Yan Ge flipped open a page and drew on the paper for a while before passing the notebook to the old man.

“This is a round ball. I want it to be woven in a way that it is both round and elastic, but also sturdy.”

The old man immediately understood, “That’s simple. It’s not much different from weaving a round fish basket, except that it needs to be closed. How big do you want it? How many?”

Yan Ge caught sight of a large bowl on the table that could fit a soccer ball perfectly, “Just a little smaller than this bowl. I need ten of them.”

“No problem. It will be a total of twenty coins. You can pay ten coins as a deposit, and you can come to collect the goods in an hour.”

Yan Ge shook his head inwardly. The price was too low. However, the price would increase in the future. He signaled for Du Juan to pay the money.

“Old man, I suppose you’ve noticed that we are outsiders. Do you know if there are any other special products in this area? Besides bamboo, what else is produced abundantly here?”

The old man shook his head, ”You came at the wrong time. If you had come two years earlier, you would have seen a variety of birds. They would land on your shoulders, and you wouldn’t have the heart to shoo them away. It’s a pity…”

Yan Ge asked Du Juan to buy a fish basket and a straw hat before leaving the bamboo shop.

They continued walking for nearly half an hour, stopping and moving. When they turned onto another street, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen spotted each other from afar and couldn’t help but smile at each other.

Huangfu Yuchen walked up to Yan Ge and looked at the fish basket and straw hat carried by Gao Feng, asking, “What are you buying these for, Little Ge?”

The others consciously stayed behind, keeping a distance of four or five steps.

“I bought them to show you,” Yan Ge said. “If we want to revive the economy of Shuangque County, we can start from this aspect.”

Huangfu Yuchen stopped in his tracks, held Yan Ge’s face, and kissed his forehead, feeling both sad and distressed. “I told you to stay at the inn because I didn’t want you to worry about these things. I came south for the imperial inspection, and I brought you along for you to enjoy and relax, not to burden yourself with concerns.”

He didn’t mind being watched by others, and Yan Ge, who had crossed over from the 21st century, cared even less about the gaze of others. His lips curved as he embraced Huangfu Yuchen’s waist. “I want to help you, and I’m not tired. Besides, reviving a dead city is an interesting challenge.”

Huangfu Yuchen smiled helplessly, “Alright, as long as you’re happy. But you must promise me that you’ll treat this as a hobby, not a responsibility. I don’t want you to feel any pressure. Have fun when it’s time to have fun, and consider these complicated matters when you’re bored and have nothing else to do.”

Song Chaobang and Jiang Gan wiped their sweat in secret. Isn’t this favor going a bit too far?

Yan Ge coughed awkwardly and glanced at Huangfu Yuchen, “I promise. Let’s go back to the inn for now.”

Once they returned to the inn and each had a cup of hot tea, Huangfu Yuchen spoke up, “Little Ge, while we were out, we were exploring potential development paths and gained some insights. Listen to our ideas first, and feel free to add any suggestions or different perspectives.”

Yan Ge nodded.

Song Chaobang began, “First, we can make full use of the bird resources in Shuangque County. Taking inspiration from the Hundred Flowers Festival in the capital, we can organize a bird-watching event or even a beauty pageant to attract tourists and stimulate the local economy.”

Jiang Gan added, “Once the tourists arrive, we need to find ways to make them stay longer and spend more in terms of food, accommodation, and entertainment. We should pay extra attention to the two major inns in the county. If the proprietors are facing financial difficulties, I believe it’s necessary for the county government to provide some subsidies to improve the quality of the inns.”

Song Chaobang looked at Yan Ge and continued, “We have also noticed the abundance of bamboo shops in the county. We can encourage the craftsmen to create more exquisite bamboo products and sell them to other regions.”

Huangfu Yuchen suggested, “These are the two main aspects for now. The Great Han Kingdom values culture, and there are many literati who appreciate and engage in artistic pursuits. Organizing a poetry gathering with the theme of birds and bamboo could be a good approach.”

Yan Ge raised his thumb in approval, and Huangfu Yuchen couldn’t laugh or cry.

Yan Ge added, “Both of these ideas are excellent. Let me briefly supplement them. Regarding the bird specialty, Old Master Fan’s extraordinary bird-calling skills can be utilized. During the bird-watching event, this unique talent can become a highlight. It is evident that Old Master Fan also cares about the development of Shuangque County and would likely be willing to assist. The initial stage won’t be easy, but we can have performances in neighboring counties or promote the event. Word of mouth will spread. As for the bamboo aspect, in addition to producing practical utensils, the craftsmen can create more exquisite items using bamboo. For example, carving bamboo into animal shapes like crabs, dragonflies, cats, dogs, etc., or making bamboo horses, small houses, and even hairpins, dyeing them in various colors. This will significantly increase their value. The idea of a poetry gathering is excellent, but it requires a relatively high reward. Otherwise, who would come to the unknown Shuangque County? After all is said and done, it can be summed up in two words—distinctive features. As long as we have distinctive features, we can definitely attract people.”

Song Chaobang and Jiang Gan nodded repeatedly. Yan Ge was known as the “Leader of the Jing Merchants Alliance,” he truly possessed a broader mindset and a more far-sighted vision than them.

Gao Feng hesitated to speak.

Yan Ge was always tolerant of his subordinates, so he smiled and said, “Speak your mind.”

Gao Feng spoke up, “Madam just ordered ten bamboo items from that bamboo shop. I wonder what they are for. I’ve been pondering for a while, but I don’t find anything particularly remarkable about those bamboo balls.” He smiled awkwardly.

Huangfu Yuchen and the others looked at Yan Ge with curiosity.

Yan Ge smiled mysteriously, “It’s a secret. The answer will be revealed after we return to the capital.”

Huangfu Yuchen and the others were stunned, then they realized that he had come up with another money-making scheme.

“Oh, by the way, Chen Chen,” Yan Ge changed the topic, “You something about the country magistrate stepping down. Now that you’re not in the capital, where will you find a new county magistrate?”

Huangfu Yuchen was once again taken aback by being called “Chen Chen” and glanced at Yan Ge helplessly. “Below the county magistrate, there are county assistants and record keepers. I have already sent someone to investigate the two of them. The county assistant just leads an aimless life and isn’t worth mentioning. The record keeper has some talent and is relatively upright. He once secretly reported the matters of the Black Demon Bandits to the prefecture yamen, but ultimately failed due to Shen’s interference. Let the record keeper temporarily act as the county magistrate. We’ll consider our options after returning to the capital. Minister Wen, please write a detailed plan based on today’s discussion and hand it to the record keeper before we leave Shuangque County.”

“Understood.”

Yang Zhuo entered the room and said, “Master, everything has been arranged properly. We will take action tonight.”

“Has Jun Xiang come back?”

Gao Yun said: “Not yet.”

Huangfu Yuchen turned to Yan Ge and said, “Would you like join in on the excitement?”

Yan Ge nodded repeatedly, “Go, we go.”

MCUS Chapter 83

Shuangque County, County Yamen

The big bellied county magistrate, Shen Jinzhong, lazily reclined on the high official chair. On his left, a charming concubine gently massaged his shoulders, while on his right, another beautiful concubine fed him fruits. Two attractive maidservants knelt on the ground, diligently rubbing his legs.

One of the concubine's hands discreetly slipped into Shen Jinzhong's robes, but he impatiently swatted it away. On any other day, he would have embraced the concubine and played with her affectionately, but today he was not in the mood. For some reason, his eyelid kept twitching, as if something significant was about to happen.

At that moment, a scream rang out from the backyard. "Ah—"

"Young Master! Send help—"

Shen Jinzhong's eyelid twitched violently, and he pushed away the people around him, hastily rushing towards the backyard, shouting loudly, "What happened to the Young Master?"

"The Young Master has been abducted by the Black Demon Bandits!"

Shen Jinzhong's mind went blank, and he nearly collapsed to the ground. He sternly asked, "How do you know it was the Black Demon Bandits?"

The wet nurse responsible for taking care of the Young Master trembled as she handed over a piece of paper.

Shen Jinzhong took a look at it and read, "To rescue your son, prepare a ransom of fifty thousand taels of silver. At three beats of the night

watchman’s drum, halfway up Mount Fushan. If even one tael is missing, he won’t see the sun again. Black Demon Bandits.”

His eyes rolled back, and he fainted.

Yang Zhuo hid in the dense trees, wordlessly looking at A Fei. In his arms, he held a four or five-year-old child, who had been put to sleep and was soundly resting.

A Fei grinned and felt proud of himself. “Boss, my poem turned out quite well, didn’t it?”

“Master—” the county magistrate’s wife, upon hearing the news, let out a miserable scream and threw herself onto Shen Jinzhong, fiercely jabbing her sharp fingers beneath his nose.

Shen Jinzhong cried out in pain and woke up.

“If you’re going to faint, at least wait until our son is rescued!” the county magistrate’s wife coldly scolded.

Yang Zhuo and A Fei exchanged a glance and quietly left with the county magistrate’s son.

“Hurry, hurry,” Shen Jinzhong’s legs were still trembling. “Prepare the sedan chair! I must go and see Zhao Yuanwai.”

In fact, Zhao Yuanwai was not an official. He was originally a wealthy man in the county, but after acquiring wealth, he pursued fame and spent money to purchase a title of “yuanwai” (honorary officer). According to the classification of scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants, changing from “merchant” to “scholar” seemed to elevate his status. He associated with officials of all sizes, and had a close relationship with County Magistrate Shen Jinzhong.

As soon as Shen Jinzhong entered the gates of the Zhao mansion, Zhao Yuanwai greeted him with a hearty laugh and a respectful gesture.

“County Magistrate Shen is here, the world is shining brightly!”

“Old friend, save me—” Shen Jinzhong desperately cried out as he rushed over.

Zhao Yuanwai’s expression changed slightly, but Shen Jinzhong didn’t notice it at all.

“What has happened to County Magistrate Shen?”

Zhao Yuanwai pulled Shen Jinzhong inside with a concerned expression and gestured for him to take a seat.

Shen Jinzhong exclaimed angrily, “Those despicable Black Demon Bandits! They have been plundering the mountain every half month, and I have shown them great tolerance. Who would have thought they would kidnap my son and demand fifty thousand taels of silver as ransom! You know, my friend, I have always led a modest lifestyle. Moreover, ever since the Black Demon Bandits settled in the Sanzhu Mountain, they have seized all the benefits. Even if I wanted to profit, I wouldn’t have the chance. Where can I find these fifty thousand taels? That’s why I have come to seek your help, hoping you can aid me in this desperate situation.”

Zhao Yuanwai, shocked and angered with a hint of concern, slammed the table. “Unbelievable! The audacity of the Black Demon Bandits! However, my friend, you have put me in a difficult situation. You mentioned earlier that the county’s economy has been in a slump these past few years, and our Zhao family business can only expand to other counties. Regrettably, just this morning, my eldest son withdrew fifty thousand taels of silver to invest in Huaicheng! Now, we have less than a hundred taels of silver left in the house. If you don’t mind, you can take it all. Consider it my contribution to my nephew.”

Shen Jinzhong felt a rush of blood to his head. Less than a hundred taels? Was he being mocked?

“You see, you see, your sincerity has truly touched me. Even with just a hundred taels, it has affected you like this,” Zhao Yuanwai patted Shen Jinzhong’s back and lied through his teeth. He had a hidden resentment. He resented Shen Jinzhong for not dispatching troops to eradicate the bandits,

as the presence of the Black Demon Bandits greatly harmed the interests of the Zhao family.

Their friendship was only based on the smooth operation of the Zhao family business. Now that Shen Jinzhong had suffered such a huge loss, Zhao Yuanwai couldn't help but enjoy the spectacle. How could he possibly lend him fifty thousand taels? Giving him a hundred taels was already a magnanimous gesture. Moreover, he didn't believe that Shen Jinzhong couldn't come up with fifty thousand taels. He could infer this just by observing the fact that Shen Jinzhong hadn't lost a single pound since he arrived in Shuangque County.

Zhao Yuanwai raised his tea cup and took a sip.

Shen Jinzhong gnashed his teeth with hidden hatred, but he couldn't afford to lose his temper at this moment. He forced a smile, bid farewell, and hurriedly made his way to the next house.

The night was dark and filled with howling winds.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen hid behind the bushes, waiting to witness the drama. Yan Ge lazily sat on Huangfu Yuchen's lap, and Huangfu Yuchen patted his head, occasionally offering him his favorite beef jerky from a wax paper package.

Not far away, Yang Zhuo, A Fei, Gao Feng, and Gao Yun, with their faces covered, embraced their swords, staring menacingly downhill. A Fei's right arm cradled a small child with a drooping head, motionless.

Before long, a group of dark figures appeared at the foot of the mountain. Yan Ge could clearly see that the leader, as described by Yang Zhuo, was indeed Shen Jinzhong, with his prominent belly. He was accompanied by twenty or thirty constables.

"My Lord, if we bring this many people up Sanzhu mountain, won't the Black Demon Bandits retaliate in anger?" a clerk struggled to climb uphill and asked.

Shen Jinzhong said, “Based on my analysis, the ones who kidnapped the young master are merely small fries from the Black Demon Bandits. This time, they must have acted without the knowledge of the leaders. Otherwise, why would they choose Fushan as the location instead of Sanzhu Mountain? If they dare to cause any trouble, we will make a big commotion and alert the Black Demon Bandit. That’s what they fear.”

Yan Ge secretly chuckled. This dog official was quite narrow-minded, but unfortunately not clever enough.

The clerk shook his head. “If we had wiped out the Black Demon Bandits when they were not yet powerful, we wouldn’t be facing this situation today.”

Shen Jinzhong gave him a cold stare, unable to say anything.

The county magistrate assistant interrupted the clerk. “It’s easier said than done! How can our few soldiers in the county eliminate the bandits?”

“Enough arguing,” Shen Jinzhong spotted a few figures not far away and spoke in a low voice.

Yang Zhuo was not as crafty as Gao Feng, so the latter acted as the leader.

Gao Feng deliberately assumed an indifferent posture, lazily cleaning his ears. “The county magistrate is indeed the county magistrate! Such arrogance, making us wait for so long.”

Shen Jinzhong glanced at the familiar clothing on the child in A Fei’s arms. He waved his hands repeatedly and anxiously said, “No, no, please forgive me, masters. It’s just that the road was difficult to traverse in the dark, which caused me to arrive a bit late. I have brought the silver. I implore you, honorable heroes, to keep your word and return my son. Is my son unharmed?”

A Fei replied, “Rest assured, not a hair on him was harmed. He is fast asleep.”

Gao Yun said in a deep voice, “Hand over the silver first. Once we have counted and confirmed, we will naturally return your son.”

Shen Jinzhong looked at the knife pressed against his son’s neck and reluctantly handed over the bundle. “Here are 49,500-taels of silver bills and 500 taels of silver. I guarantee that not a single coin is missing.”

Gao Feng and Gao Yun exchanged a glance, both somewhat surprised. They had thought that with the Black Demon Bandits in the picture, the Shen family couldn’t come up with any money. They hadn’t expected him to gather the full fifty thousand taels.

Yan Ge glanced at Huangfu Yuchen, whose cold smile could make people shudder. He patted Huangfu Yuchen’s thigh and said, “Watch me take revenge for you.”

Immediately, he secretly transmitted a message to Gao Yun, “Steal one silver ingot.”

Gao Yun was quick-witted and je understood Yan Ge’s intention. After receiving the bundle, he skillfully used his sleeve to discreetly take away a five tael silver ingot, then began counting by the torchlight. “Four silver bills of ten thousand taels each, nine silver bills of one thousand taels each, followed by five silver bills of one hundred taels each, fifty taels per ingot of cash silver, one, two, three…”

“Hmmm….you’re short by fifty taels.” Gao Feng’s voice turned cold.

“That is impossible!” Shen Jinzhong exclaimed.

“This is unacceptable! How dare you fool this lord! It seems you don’t want this son of yours anymore!” Gao Feng and Gao Yun, being brothers, were incredibly synchronized. With a wave of their hands, they ordered, “Take action!”

The young master of the county magistrate let out a miserable scream as blood sprayed from his neck, and his head rolled away.

“My son!” Shen Jinzhong’s vision darkened, and he didn’t even have time to give the command before fainting on the ground.

“Kill them all!” Gao Feng gave the order once again.

Shen Jinzhong had passed out, and with no one else to lead, the group scattered in fear, abandoning Shen Jinzhong’s unconscious body.

Gao Feng and the others pursued for a few steps before retracing their steps. They exchanged glances and burst into hearty laughter.

Yan Ge was especially delighted, “Hehehe…”

The young master of the county magistrate had been sent back to the county office long ago. The one who had screamed earlier was Yan Ge.

Shen Jinzhong, under intense pressure, couldn’t discern the difference between his voice and that of his own son. The decapitated figure was merely a straw man dressed in the county magistrate’s son’s clothes, and the blood was prepared in advance in a blood bag.

After the laughter subsided, a heavy atmosphere settled among them. Fifty thousand taels was not a small sum. Who could dare to claim that it represented all of Shen Jinzhong’s wealth?

“Young Master, what about this silver?” Gao Feng asked.

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “The governor will use this silver as compensation for the soldiers who fought against the bandits. It is meant as solace.”

Yang Zhuo sighed, “Young Master’s consideration for the soldiers is truly a blessing for them.”

Huangfu Yuchen stated, “On the road ahead, your mission will be expanded. Whether entering the county or the city, you must gather information on the county magistrate and the governor. If you encounter corrupt officials, deal with them one by one!”

“Yes!” Yang Zhuo and the others responded solemnly.

“Let’s go back.” Huangfu Yuchen took Yan Ge’s hand and turned to descend the mountain.

Seeing them leaving, Gao Feng picked the unconscious magistrate and hurriedly followed.

MCUS Chapter 84

During breakfast, Huangfu Yuchen finally received a report from Jun Xiang.

“General Wang Kui, the governor of this province, is leading an army of two thousand soldiers. They are currently about seven to eight li away from Shuangque County.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. “You and A Fei keep a close watch on General Wang. Report immediately if there are any developments.”

“Yes.” Jun Xiang and A Fei obeyed the order and left.

Huangfu Yuchen had Deng Mande bring a map of Sanzhu Mountain. Yan Ge also approached. He was able to understand the terrain but was completely clueless about its intricacies. He glanced at Huangfu Yuchen, seeking an explanation.

Huangfu Yuchen took hold of him and sat him down at the table, explaining, “This is Sanzhu Mountain. Its peaks tower high, offering a wide view, making it easy to defend but difficult to attack. With only two thousand soldiers, the governor cannot fully surround Sanzhu Mountain. To eliminate the bandits, a direct assault is not feasible. We can only resort to a battle of wits.”

Deng Mande and Du Juan instinctively moved back and stood by the door.

“How do we employ this battle of wits?” Yan Ge asked.

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “Look here, we can…”

On the same day, Shen Jinzhong in the county office asked the same question while cautiously conversing with a mighty middle-aged man. This man, dressed in military attire, carried himself with a commanding air. He was Wang Kui, the governor of Yuanzhou.

Shen Jinzhong had learned in the middle of the night that his son had not been killed. This morning, he heard that the imperial envoy and the governor had arrived together, and he vaguely deduced the truth behind his son's abduction. It had almost frightened him to the point of losing his wits. With no fruitful ideas on how to handle the situation, he only sought to perform well in front of the governor and the imperial envoy in hopes of redeeming himself.

"Military strategist, what do you think?" Wang Kui asked the thin, bearded man beside him.

The strategist looked at the map and stroked his beard. "Sanzhu Mountain has steep slopes on two sides, making it difficult to attack. The other two sides offer a wide view. It is challenging to approach without being detected. As for the current plan, we may have to 'disturb the grass to startle the snake.'"

"What does that mean?" Wang Kui inquired, glancing intentionally or unintentionally at Jun Xiang.

Jun Xiang pretended not to notice and simply listened without interrupting.

The strategist explained, "First, we need to find a few knowledgeable guides familiar with the terrain of Sanzhu Mountain. Since we cannot hide our movements from them, we might as well not try. The governor will boldly lead the troops toward Sanzhu Mountain, taking the normal route. We will send people up the mountain to persuade the bandits to surrender. This will make them lower their guard, thinking that we, like Magistrate Shen before, dare not engage in battle. We will deliberately maintain a stalemate with them for a day without taking any action, while also showing great impatience. They will surely observe us in secret and underestimate us as a result. Then, at night, we will set up military tents at the foot of the mountain, pretending to have the soldiers rest inside. But in reality, we will

quietly divide the majority of the forces and follow the guides up the mountain, catching them off guard. This way, we may have a sixty percent chance of success."

Wang Kui nodded. "Your plan is reasonable. Let's proceed accordingly."

At Ruyi Inn, Huangfu Yuchen had just finished explaining to Yan Ge.

"These are the few methods I can think of."

"A few methods? Excessive modesty is arrogance!" Yan Ge glanced at him with a playful smile. "In that case, let me test you. Imagine you are leading the troops to eradicate the bandits, and I am one of the bandits who has stolen information from your side. I know that you might use the methods you just mentioned to deal with us."

"Alright." Huangfu Yuchen was interested in playing along. He looked at Yan Ge with a smile, then lowered his head and lightly kissed his lips. "And then?"

Yan Ge pushed him away, his face serious. "The beauty trap won't work on me."

Huangfu Yuchen laughed. "Very well. Please continue."

Yan Ge pondered for a moment and said, "No matter which method you use to deal with us, we will stay on the mountain and adapt to any situation. We will station guards at the main entrances and shoot arrows whenever someone approaches. The mountain is rich in resources, and we won't starve even if we are surrounded for a long time. There are also plenty of bamboo, so we can have as many arrows as we need. What do you think?"

"We can call this method the 'Rogue Strategy.' It's not a bad idea," Huangfu Yuchen teased.

"Alright, now it's your turn to tell me what you would do." Yan Ge leaned on his shoulder, a smug look on his face.

Huangfu Yuchen pondered for a moment and said, “In that case, when the wind is favorable, we can create dense smoke by starting a fire. And we can use a slightly more damaging trick by adding a sedative to the smoke. Fushan Mountain, which is on the opposite side of Sanzhu Mountain, could come in handy.”

Yan Ge’s face grew even more intrigued, and he spoke leisurely, “What if there are underground tunnels in the stronghold?”

Huangfu Yuchen suddenly embraced him tightly and kissed him deeply. “Baby, your words have reminded me. We must be cautious in dealing with the bandits this time. If they really escape through the underground tunnels, all our previous efforts will be in vain.”

“What’s with the ‘baby’?” Yan Ge glanced at him, smiling mischievously. “Round one, I win?”

“You win,” Huangfu Yuchen brushed away the strands of hair that fell on his face. “What reward do you want?”

“Just remember it,” Yan Ge grinned in satisfaction. “What’s next?”

“Sanzhu Mountain is vast, and if there are indeed underground tunnels, it won’t be easy to locate them,” Huangfu Yuchen pondered for a moment. “We can use a diversion. Send someone skilled in martial arts to infiltrate the bandits and shout, ‘The leader has escaped through the underground tunnel.’ If the other bandits know the location of the tunnel, they will all rush towards it. If they don’t, it will cause chaos. Either way, it will be advantageous for us.”

Yan Ge stared at him intently.

“Awed?” Huangfu Yuchen playfully asked.

Yan Ge lowered his head softly. “Alright, you win the second round,” he admired this man wholeheartedly. Hus powerful move of the underground tunnels was easily resolved with just a few words from him.

“Hehe,” Huangfu Yuchen ruffled his hair, always so happy when they were together. “What’s next?”

Yan Ge rallied himself. “Next—if the tunnels are discovered, I won’t run forward. Instead, I’ll turn back and return to the surface. I’ll take advantage of the soldiers’ distraction and eliminate one of them, then change into his uniform and make a bold escape.”

Huangfu Yuchen asked, “Are you one of the leaders or just a small fry?”

Yan Ge looked at himself, how could someone as magnificent as him be just a small fry? “Of course, I’m one of the leaders!”

Huangfu Yuchen suppressed a laugh. “If one of the leaders abandons his subordinates and flees like that, it will surely demoralize the bandits, making it easier to eliminate them.”

Yan Ge was at a loss for words. After a while, he continued, “Okay, let’s start anew through the tunnels. If the tunnels are discovered, I’ll still return. I am more familiar with the terrain on the mountain than you. I’ll lead my men to ambush you, utilizing traps and mechanisms within the stronghold to my advantage.”

This time, Huangfu Yuchen pondered for a bit longer. “It is said that four of the five leaders of the Black Demon Bandits are martial arts experts from the martial world. The eldest leader is even well-educated. It is possible that some of them possess knowledge of mechanisms. Perhaps we should stick with the diversion tactic. Send a small team of ten deep into the stronghold, and if anything unusual happens, release signal arrows.”

“If something happens, will you give up the attack?” Yan Ge asked, pursuing the idea further.

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “No. If I hear the signal arrows, I’ll release fire arrows. The fact that the bandits went through such great lengths to dig escape tunnels within the mountain shows how much they value the stronghold. They won’t stand idly by as it’s destroyed. They will divert some of their forces to put out the fire, avoiding traps and mechanisms

along the way, which will inadvertently guide us. Dealing with them will be much easier at that point. If the leaders don't show themselves, so be it. But once they do, we'll capture the thieves and seize the king. As long as we capture a few of the leaders, the Black Demon Bandits will inevitably disintegrate."

Yan Ge pondered deeply. "At that point, it's either stubborn resistance or escaping through the tunnels."

Huangfu Yuchen smiled lightly and touched the corner of his mouth. "There is one more method."

"What method?"

Huangfu Yuchen said, "Use a beauty trap on me. Your seduction is undoubtedly effective on me."

Yan Ge threw a punch, which was effortlessly caught by Huangfu Yuchen, who was smiling.

"No, wait. I am the villain! Villains have no principles. I can take a few people hostage. If you don't retreat, I will kill the hostages. In this situation, what will you do?" Yan Ge's face was full of cunning, as if he had thought of something.

Huangfu Yuchen said, "Hmm, I have considered this question. If the bandits really hold hostages, we can either send a skilled practitioner of lightness technique for a swift rescue or exchange the captured bandits for the hostages. We will prioritize saving the hostages first."

Yan Ge boasted, "Hahaha! Actually, the hostages are not ordinary civilians. They are people who resemble honest individuals, but are actually my subordinates in disguise!"

Huangfu Yuchen's expression turned serious. "This bandit leader is indeed cunning!"

Yan Ge glared at him and continued, “They are all experts. Once they get close to you, they will unexpectedly attack and kill you and a few other leaders.”

Huangfu Yuchen appeared relaxed.

“You already have another countermeasure without even thinking?” Yan Ge stared at him suspiciously.

Huangfu Yuchen gazed at him with a smile. “Why should I think? By that time, you will definitely be by my side. Even if I don’t react in time, you will save me.”

Yan Ge placed his hands on his lover’s thighs, leaning in to kiss his eyes, wearing a smiling expression that captivated Huangfu Yuchen’s heart. He tilted his head and kissed his lips.

Outside, Deng Mande knocked on the door. “Young Master, Madam, A Fei has returned.”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen separated, lowering their heads and pretending to study the map.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Let him come in.”

A Fei relayed General Wang’s decision concisely and clearly.

Huangfu Yuchen frowned.

Yan Ge also felt that this approach was inappropriate, but he didn’t say anything and continued to ponder on how to “defeat” the officers and troops suppressing the bandits. Huangfu Yuchen would make the final judgment on Wang Kui’s side.

Huangfu Yuchen only nodded to A Fei, indicating that he understood, without saying anything else.

A Fei then left for the county office.

Deng Mande knocked on the door again. “Young Master, Madam, it’s time for lunch.”

“We know.”

While they were having their meal, Yan Ge suddenly slammed the table. “I just thought of something. If you can use the strategy of ‘capture the leader first’ against us, we can also use the same strategy against you.”

Huangfu Yuchen sighed. “Focus on eating. We’ll discuss it after we finish our meal.”

Yan Ge quickly finished the rice in his bowl. “I’m done eating.”

Huangfu Yuchen: “….”

“We can capture you,” Yan Ge quickly chewed and swallowed a few mouthfuls, “by first sending a group of men to separate you from the others, and then the five leaders will join forces to deal with you.”

“Facing five opponents alone, I will definitely lose.” Huangfu Yuchen refilled his bowl with rice. “Eat another bowl.”

Yan Ge was being brushed off. Helpless, he had no choice but to eat his meal properly. Once he was full, he took Huangfu Yuchen’s hand and placed it on his own stomach.

Huangfu Yuchen finally responded seriously, “Do you think that the five of them can handle the two of us together?”

Yan Ge was taken aback, smiling mischievously. “They won’t stand a chance.”

———

At Sanzhu Mountain.

At the foot of the mountain, the military flag of the military governor displayed the character “Wang,” fluttering in the wind. Soldiers dressed in

iron-gray armor stood in neat formation, exuding solemnity and gravity. Wang Kui and strategist Dong Liang stood at the forefront, gazing at the mountain. Shen Jinzhong stood silently by their side, occasionally stealing glances at the mountain with his small eyes, as if calculating something. Jun Xiang stood inconspicuously on the edge, with his hands behind his back, appearing as if he would not interfere with Wang Kui’s decision-making.

On the top of Sanzhu Mountain, under the azure sky, the verdant mountains undulated like a green blanket. Clusters of red leaves blazed passionately upon the green expanse, while purple flowers formed a layer upon layer, interweaving in the faint mist. It was like a beautiful painting crafted by the heavens.

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Halfway up the mountain, five figures stood bathed in sunlight, their robes billowing in the wind with a crisp rustling sound. In the center stood a woman, her hands on her hips, a golden-hilted broadsword planted firmly on the ground with her right foot stepping on a stone.

The woman appeared to be around thirty years old, dressed like an unmarried young lady, wearing a short shirt on top and black leather shorts below, revealing a pair of sun-kissed honey-colored legs and wearing rough ankle boots. Not only was she beautiful, but she also had a delicate and petite figure that made it difficult for one to associate her with the leader of bandits. If she were wearing a dress, she would be a graceful lady. Around her waist hung a broadsword wider than her own waist. This person was none other than the head of the Black Demon Bandits, Da Dao. The four men on either side were the other gang leaders: Er Fu, San Jian, Si Qiang, and Wu Gun. Although Er Fu and Si Qiang were noticeably older than Da Dao, they still regarded her as the leader, indicating that Da Dao was undoubtedly not a simple character.

Behind them, over two thousand members of the Black Demon Bandits had probably already mobilized, holding various weapons in their hands, their faces displaying a cold and ruthless expression as they stared down at the officials and soldiers below without any fear.

On the narrow path leading up the mountain, a young soldier cautiously climbed upward. The closer he got to the group of bandits, the more cautious his steps became. His name was Huang Zhengkai, renowned for his eloquence and popularity in the barracks. Little did he know, it was precisely because of this that Dong Liang recommended him to Governor Wang to persuade the bandits to surrender. If he succeeded, he would achieve great merit. However, how could these bandits be easily dealt with?

He regretted why he was so articulate on ordinary days and regretted why Dong Liang discovered this trait of his.

Da Dao turned her head and coldly stared at him as he approached.

Huang Zhengkai halted his steps, seeing that she did not order him to be shot, and then continued walking, wiping the cold sweat from his brow.

“Masters, I understand that the situation is tense now, so I won’t waste words. Lord Wang’s intention is that if you are willing to surrender, those with serious crimes can receive lenient punishment, those with minor crimes can receive even lighter sentences, and those innocent might even be released. Before committing grave mistakes, everything can be discussed. Lord Wang, as the military governor of the province, always keeps his promises.”

Da Dao pointed to the edge of the cliff, her voice gentle without any malicious intent. “Come over here, I didn’t hear clearly what you just said. If we surrender, can we really receive lenient punishment?”

Huang Zhengkai was delighted and followed her suggestion, walking toward the edge of the cliff. From here, he could clearly see the people and horses below.

“Indeed. Lord Wang said—”

Before he finished speaking, Da Dao swung her broadsword, slashing across his chest.

“You—” Huang Zhengkai pointed at her, then collapsed to the ground, motionless, his clothes stained with fresh blood.

San Jian was astonished and foolishly asked, “Big sister, didn’t we say we wouldn’t kill envoys during a battle?”

Da Dao snorted coldly. “Do you think those officials and soldiers down there can really make a difference? I’m giving them a warning first to intimidate them with our momentum.”

Si Qiang and Wu Gun looked at her with admiration.

“Big sister, you make a valid point.”

Below, Wang Kui and Dong Liang watched as the female bandit ruthlessly killed Huang Zhengkai, and they were shocked and angry.

“This is unacceptable! This is outrageous! These bandits are too arrogant!” Wang Kui couldn’t contain his anger. “They don’t regard the government or the court with respect!”

Dong Liang was comparatively calm and he quickly tried to calm him down, as Wang Kui’s reaction was in line with their original plan.

Jun Xiang frowned in secret. These bandits were indeed troublesome. The crucial point might still lie with that female gang leader.

Er Fu approached Da Dao’s side, his expression not as relaxed as that of San Jian and the others. “Big sister, although what you said is not wrong, this person is an official. By doing this, aren’t we blatantly provoking the court?”

Da Dao remained unfazed. “Take him away and treat his wounds.”

Er Fu and the others were all taken aback. “He’s not dead yet?”

Da Dao calmly replied, “He’s only injured. Pretending to kill him was just a test of the government’s attitude. If they respond with fury, it means they have truly made up their minds to exterminate us, and then we will unleash our full force. Keeping this person alive can also serve as a hostage. If Governor Wang loses his nerve, we can continue to enjoy our freedom for a while longer.”

Everyone suddenly realized. “So that’s the case.”

Inside the county town at this time, almost all the shops were closed and not doing any business. Only the usually deserted teahouse suddenly became lively. The common people knew that the government had dispatched soldiers to eradicate the bandits, and they gathered together to discuss in

hushed voices. Anxious yet hopeful, they all longed for the officials and soldiers to achieve complete victory so that they could have hope.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen stayed inside the inn and did not go out. Yan Ge was writing a letter to Wei Jushen, who was managing First Company, while Huangfu Yuchen was reviewing a few documents while waiting for further news from the mountain.

Gao Yun stood outside the door and said, “Madam, the items you ordered from the bamboo crafts shop have arrived.”

“Come in, let me have a look.” Yan Ge put down his pen and enthusiastically got up.

Gao Feng handed him a string of bamboo balls he was holding.

Yan Ge and the others approached curiously.

Yan Ge examined each ball: all of them were perfectly round, meeting his requirements. He picked one up and examined it closely. Then, he smashed it on the ground, and it bounced back with good elasticity.

“What are these things for?” Huangfu Yuchen approached.

“It’s a secret,” Yan Ge said to Gao Yun. “Take one and kick it against the wall. Don’t deliberately use internal force. Count as you kick it until it breaks.”

Gao Yun froze. Could it be that Madam found him too idle recently and was punishing him in this way?

Gao Feng patted his shoulder with a smile. “Madam has reasons for doing so.”

Huangfu Yuchen asked, “Are you testing the quality of these things?”

Gao Yun finally understood and took the ball and went outside.

Thus, everyone in the inn listened to the continuous dull thumping sounds coming from downstairs. They sounded muffled through the walls, creating a hypnotic effect. That afternoon, the innkeeper slept soundly, his head resting on the counter.

Gao Yun rushed back with a broken ball. “Madam, the ball is broken.”

Huangfu Yuchen looked at Yan Ge. “The quality is not good.”

Yan Ge, however, smiled. “That’s what I wanted. Now you probably understand my purpose. These balls will indeed sell well in the future, priced between 2 to 4 coins each. Children have less strength, so a ball can last them about a month. Most families can afford it. If used by adults with more strength, kicking two hours a day would require two balls. Kicking every day, that’s 60 balls per month. This will be a good source of income for Shuangque County.”

Gao Yun scratched his head. “Will adults really enjoy playing with these?”

Yan Ge grinned without saying a word.

Huangfu Yuchen stared at the bamboo ball, lost in thought.

“But, Madam, this thing isn’t difficult to make. If others want to imitate it, it will be easy,” Deng Mande said, knowing that Yan Ge supported everyone speaking up, so he spoke.

Yan Ge nodded. “That’s true, but I believe there aren’t many who can create something as tightly designed. Besides, competition leads to development and breakthroughs. We can only show them the path; we can’t hold their hands forever.”

The others expressed their agreement, feeling enlightened.

In the late night, a hurried knocking interrupted Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge’s sleep.

Both of them guessed that there must be new developments from Sanzhu Mountain.

“Come in and speak,” Huangfu Yuchen gestured, and the latch on the door automatically slid open.

Although there were few guests in the inn, they still had to be cautious.

“Yes,” A Fei entered and promptly reported from behind the curtain, “Young Master, as planned, General Wang led the troops deep into the mountain and suffered a crushing defeat. Five hundred soldiers died, and three hundred were injured. General Wang has now led the troops back down the mountain.”

Huangfu Yuchen fell silent for a moment and said, “I have gathered all the doctors in the county at the Jixiang Inn. You will lead them to tend to the wounded soldiers. Tomorrow morning, you will instruct Wang Kui to…..…”

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“ That’s it. Do you understand?”

A Fei acknowledged silently without asking any further questions and quickly left.

In the dim dawn, a bandit who was closely observing the activity down the mountain noticed that Wang Kui called over a soldier and said a few words to him. He secretly handed something to the soldier, and then the soldier, accompanied by two others, swiftly rode away on horseback. The bandit immediately called for Da Dao.

“Big sister, I just saw Governor Wang instruct three soldiers to return to the county, and he gave them something. I suspect Wang Kui intends to seek reinforcements from the neighboring Zhou Prefecture Commandery!”

Er Fu, San Jian, Si Qiang, and Wu Gun all showed great concern. While it was not impossible, Zhou Prefecture was close and with fast horses, they could arrive in just one day.

Wu Gun solemnly said, “Big sister, it seems they have made up their minds to exterminate us. We should retreat as soon as possible.”

Er Fu shook his head. “Retreating won’t be easy with over two thousand people. It will create a lot of movement.”

“Retreat?” A coldness flashed in Da Dao’s eyes. “We have spent two years building this place, and it took more than eight months just to dig the tunnel to the other side of the mountain. Are you willing to leave this place? If we leave, where will we find another suitable location? We can’t retreat easily. Even if we do retreat, we must show those officials some color. When we go to other places in the future, let the local authorities hear our name and fear us in advance!”

“Big sister is right!” Si Qiang nodded in agreement.

“Convey my orders…” Da Dao raised her arm.

The entire day passed without any major movements from the foot of the mountain. On the mountain, aside from a dozen people on the cliff keeping watch, there was silence.

Sanzhu Mountain seemed to have fallen into a deep silence.

In the middle of the night, the thunderous sound of hooves suddenly appeared, getting closer and closer.

Da Dao leaped to the edge of the cliff, followed closely by Er Fu and the others. The five of them looked down the mountain and were all taken aback. They saw numerous torches flickering like stars, converging into two fiery dragons, rapidly approaching. By the light of the fire, they could clearly see the long stretch of the entire troop. A rough estimate indicated that there were at least ten thousand people!

Three leaders rode on horses, exuding a commanding aura. The one in the middle had a particularly menacing presence. With a wave of his spear, the troop split into two, dispersing to both sides. Clearly, they were surrounding Sanzhu Mountain!

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were also among the crowd. Yan Ge struggled to maintain a stoic expression, but inside, he was almost bursting with laughter.

Huangfu Yuchen was truly clever! These nearly ten thousand people were not soldiers but ordinary people from the county. Early this morning, Huangfu Yuchen had ordered the county to be sealed off, aiming to prevent the Black Demon Bandits from gathering information inside the city. Then, he gathered all the women in the county, and they hastily made black official caps out of paper, shaped like helmets and painted a gunmetal gray. Some were even wrapped haphazardly in black cloth. In addition, he instructed the magistrate to call on the common people to wear black clothes, don the fake helmets, hold their heads high, and approach Sanzhu Mountain under the cover of darkness.

At the same time, he arranged for a few genuine soldiers to mix in the crowd, holding torches. The light of the torches was limited, even if someone on the mountain used a telescope to observe them, they could only see the people holding torches and a few others nearby. They would never discover that most of the soldiers were impostors.

The bandits on the mountain were frightened and disoriented. Some of the timid ones muttered about surrendering, while others secretly planned to find an opportunity to escape. There were even some who took advantage of the distraction to charge down the mountain, shouting, “I surrender, don’t shoot!”

Among these bandits, only a few were guilty of serious crimes. Most of them would receive a maximum sentence of a few months or two to three years. They had their own calculations. If they really fought against the soldiers, even the innocent would be guilty!

Upon seeing this situation, Da Dao’s face turned ashen.

Si Qiang said resentfully, “Boss, these bastards are worthless! They don’t care about us, so why should we care about them? Let’s retreat!”

Huangfu Yuchen said to Jun Xiang, “Surround but don’t attack. Wait for the signal.”

Jun Xiang nodded.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen swiftly flew up the mountain under the cover of night.

Wang Kui looked at them in astonishment and asked Jun Xiang, “Who are those two?”

Jun Xiang casually replied, “Oh, they are my two martial arts masters.”

Masters? So those two are masters with high martial arts skills? Wang Kui was stunned, but he didn’t dwell on it for long.

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Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen arrived at the mountain, where chaos had already ensued. With their exceptional lightness skills, they quickly searched the entire bandit stronghold but couldn't find the five individuals described by A Fei.

Huangfu Yuchen muttered to himself, "Could there really be a tunnel?"

Yan Ge covered his nose and exclaimed loudly, "Damn it! The five leaders have escaped through the tunnel!"

Huangfu Yuchen: "…"

"What?" The bandits were startled, and a few of them quickly ran in the same direction.

Yan Ge gave a smile to Huangfu Yuchen and pulled him to follow.

They arrived at an inconspicuous wooden house and watched as one of the bandits turned an unremarkable flower pot. Suddenly, the wooden cabinet against the wall shifted aside, revealing an entrance to an underground tunnel.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen swiftly moved out, leaping down the tunnel. The passage was wide and high, evidently prepared for a large-scale retreat. The sound of footsteps in a distance confirmed their suspicion that the five leaders had indeed attempted to escape through the tunnel.

The two pursued swiftly and soon caught up with the five ahead.

Upon seeing two shadows flashing before them, Da Dao was taken aback and raised her hand, shouting, "Stop."

As the torchlight flickered, two figures appeared before them, blocking their way.

The five observed the two with vigilance, a hint of astonishment on their faces.

Not only were these two individuals remarkably handsome, but their attire was also exquisite. They seemed entirely out of place in a bandit stronghold.

Huangfu Yuchen, having been accustomed to a life of luxury since childhood, had not seen a decline in his standard of living since becoming an emperor. The hairpin adorning his head was made of top-quality yellow jade, smooth and glossy. The white robe he wore was tailored from the most expensive cloud brocade, with subtle golden threads shimmering in the sunlight, emanating an unparalleled sense of nobility.

Those who could wear clothing made of cloud brocade were either rich or noble. The unique craft of cloud brocade involved weaving with an old-fashioned jacquard loom and required the cooperation of a jacquard weaver and a textile worker. Together, they could only produce about two inches of fabric in a day, emphasizing the exorbitant cost of this material.

While Yan Ge himself was not particularly concerned about material comforts, as Huangfu Yuchen's beloved, his attire matched or even surpassed Huangfu Yuchen's. Just the layer of white bear fur lining on his robe collar held considerable value, not to mention the golden-threaded belt and the precious white jade ornament adorning his waist, which glimmered conspicuously in the firelight.

Da Dao asked sternly, "Who are you?"

"We are the ones who came to capture you," Yan Ge replied with a smile. Like a drifting white cloud, he launched a direct attack on Da Dao.

–Capture the leader first.

Er Fu sneered, “You are not qualified to challenge the leader!” Simultaneously, he swiftly moved to intercept Yan Ge, wielding a large axe aggressively.

Huangfu Yuchen’s figure flickered as he blocked Er Fu’s path, his sword remaining sheathed. With a powerful and agile movement of his right foot, he forcefully struck Er Fu’s wrist.

Er Fu’s wrist tingled, and his axe flew out of his hand, embedding itself in the wall five or six inches deep. He stared at Huangfu Yuchen in astonishment, his eyes no longer filled with contempt.

Si Qiang also became alarmed and couldn’t help but rush forward to help. However, Wu Gang held him back. If Er Fu could only contend with their opponent for a single move, intervening would undermine Er Fu’s dignity.

Meanwhile, San Jian saw that Er Fu had been intercepted by Huangfu Yuchen, so he leaped out like a white fish in the waves to intercept Yan Ge, slashing his sharp sword towards Yan Ge’s chest.

Yan Ge’s lips curled into a smile as he calmly executed a mid-air somersault, his right palm striking San Jian’s chest like an illusion. Then, like an arrow, he swiftly rushed towards Da Dao. By the time San Jian regained his balance, Yan Ge had already arrived in front of Da Dao.

Da Dao’s pupils contracted. With a “swoosh,” she unsheathed her broadsword, assuming a squatting horse stance, stabilizing her lower body, and swung a powerful strike towards Yan Ge, as forceful as breaking through bamboo, surging with a murderous aura.

Yan Ge raised an eyebrow in surprise. This young lady had a delicate figure, yet her strength was not insignificant. This strike alone carried at least a thousand catties of force.

He calmly extended both arms, using only the tip of his right foot as a pivot and axis, rotating half a circle to gracefully evade the attack. The force of Da Dao’s strike landed on the ground, leaving a long trench.

By now, Yan Ge had already positioned himself behind Da Dao, and his scabbard unceremoniously struck her back.

Da Dao was worthy of being a leader, she didn't utter a sound of protest. With a shake of her right hand, several silver rings adorning the back of the broadsword jingled, and her technique changed abruptly. The shadows of her broadsword multiplied, as if a hundred or more large broadswords simultaneously attacked, exuding a powerful murderous aura, surging towards Yan Ge.

Yan Ge soared into the air, unsheathing his sword. His wrist moved several times, firmly blocking the true form of the big broadsword. With a forceful shake, he landed effortlessly, placing his left hand behind his back, exuding an extremely elegant demeanor.

Seeing that Da Dao was now kneeling on one knee, with a sword against her neck, the others present exclaimed in disbelief, "Boss!"

Huangfu Yuchen moved swiftly, and within a few seconds, he sealed the acupoints of the other four individuals.

"Baby, stay here and guard. I will go finish up the rest."

Yan Ge nodded in response.

They worked tirelessly until dawn, and all the people in the Black Demon Bandits were captured.

Huangfu Yuchen instructed Jun Xiang, "Investigate Shen Jinzhong's house thoroughly, and temporarily appoint the record keeper as the county magistrate. Use the confiscated assets for soldiers' relief funds and subsidies. Interrogate the members of the Black Demon Lair, for those who haven't participated in the robberies, as well as those who were coerced or misled, educate them and expel them from the county. Those with minor offenses should be imprisoned in the county jail, while those with serious crimes should be escorted to the prefectural capital for trial. Those sentenced to death will be executed publicly."

This action brought great relief to the people. The gloom that had hung over the entire county dispersed, and fireworks were set off to celebrate.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen blocked out the noise, closed the door, and went to sleep.

Upon hearing about Yan Ge's recent actions, Song Ruhao's illness worsened.

Song Chaobang sighed. "This illness cannot go on like this…"

A hint of resentment flashed in Song Ruhao's eyes. "Father, I suspect that Yan Ge poisoned me!"

"What? He poisoned you?" Song Chaobang stood up in surprise.

"Yes!" Song Ruhao said, "It's entirely possible. Don't you find it strange how my illness suddenly became so severe? At first, I was just pretending, my body wasn't really that weak. His medical skills are astonishing, everyone knows that. Poisoning someone wouldn't be difficult for him."

Song Chaobang furrowed his brow and stroked his beard. "Even if that's true, we can't do anything without evidence."

Song Ruhao sneered, his handsome features contorting with a fierce expression. "Who said we can't? You should go and tell the Emperor about this. Even if he doesn't believe us, there will always be a seed of doubt in his heart. As long as that suspicion exists, it will eventually grow into a bigger problem."

After contemplating for a moment, Song Chaobang nodded. "You're right." This matter indeed needed him to take action. He was the Emperor's tutor, and even if this angered the Emperor, he would, at most, be reprimanded. If it were Song Ruhao who spoke up, the Emperor would simply think that he was making baseless accusations and would dislike him even more.

Du Zhengfeng quietly left and entered Huangfu Yuchen's room.

"Master, Master Song is in Young Master Song's room, and they…"

Huangfu Yuchen interrupted, “I know.”

After Du Zhengfeng left, Yan Ge stared at Huangfu Yuchen with a bad expression.

Huangfu Yuchen quickly reassured him, “Baby, I’m sorry for letting you take the blame. Don’t worry, I will clear your name.”

Not long after, there was a knock on the door.

Yan Ge used his spiritual sense to confirm that it was indeed Song Chaobang.

“Should I leave and give him a chance to complain?” Yan Ge asked.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, and Yan Ge flew out of the window.

“Come in,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

After Song Chaobang entered the room and saw that only Huangfu Yuchen was present, he felt relieved.

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at him indifferently and looked at the memorial on the table. He calmly said, “It’s Master Song. I’m currently reviewing the development plan for Shuangque County written by Master Jiang. If Master Song doesn’t have urgent matters, we can discuss it another day.”

— Teacher, I’m giving you another chance.

Song Chaobang felt that Huangfu Yuchen’s tone was somewhat strange, but after secretly observing his expression and finding nothing unusual, he thought that he might be overthinking. It was rare for Yan Ge not to be with Huangfu Yuchen, and if he missed this opportunity, it would be difficult to find another.

“Young Master, earlier, my son and I discussed something. Although I don’t entirely believe it, upon further consideration, I think I should bring it up to you. As the saying goes, it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

“Oh?” Huangfu Yuchen raised his head. “What is it?”

Song Chaobang looked solemn, “Hao’er has been taking the medicine prescribed by Doctor Zhang, but his illness has not improved. He suspects that someone poisoned him. Even the doctor couldn’t find out, so the person must be very powerful, and only those with superb medical skills can concoct this kind of miracle medicine.”

“Does Master Song suspect Doctor Zhang?” Huangfu Yuchen asked.

Song Chaobang hesitated and said, “No, perhaps… it’s the Madam. Young Master, I naturally believe in the Madam’s innocence, but I still ask you to investigate this matter thoroughly. Clear the Madam’s name and resolve the misunderstanding.”

A cold smile played on the corners of Huangfu Yuchen’s lips as he leaned back in his chair, his gaze inscrutable. “The Madam is undoubtedly innocent. Because I am the one who administered the medicine.”

Song Chaobang looked at him in shock, his trembling hands clasped in a respectful gesture. “Young Master?”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Master Song must not have forgotten about the mysterious organization that night. On that evening, when the Madam was engaged in a confrontation with the three assailants, Young Master Song attempted to attack him from behind, intending to push him towards the swords of the black-clad men. The coachman witnessed this scene clearly.”

Song Chaobang’s face turned pale.

In a low voice, Huangfu Yuchen continued, “Young Master Song has no enmity with the coachman. Master Song shouldn’t suspect the coachman of deliberately slandering him.”

“I dare not!” Song Chaobang hurriedly replied.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “We knew the Grand Tutor would understand. Now that this matter has been brought to light, Song Guiren will be sent back to

the capital and confined to the Cold Palace."

Song Chaobang's heart trembled, and weakly he said, "I will obey Your Majesty's orders. I only ask for some time to bid farewell to my son."

Yan Ge was strolling down the street when he suddenly heard a notification from the system: "Ding. Side mission—Send Song Guiren to the Cold Palace, mission successful. Reward: 400 taels of silver and a silver chest. Would you like to open the silver chest now?"

Song Ruhao was sent to the Cold Palace? Yan Ge's lips curled into a smile as he rubbed his chin and selected "Yes."

"Congratulations, you have received a millennium golden Ginseng."

A shining golden ginseng, almost the size of a newborn baby, appeared before Yan Ge, glistening like a golden doll and almost blinding his eyes. He quickly stowed the ginseng in the system backpack.

This golden ginseng, similar in miraculous effects to the Zhantian Vine he had obtained before, could grant longevity to ordinary people with just a small piece the size of a fingernail, while cultivators could enhance their cultivation by consuming it. Moreover, adding the golden ginseng to medicinal pills could increase their effectiveness by a hundredfold.

Yan Ge's steps became lighter, his figure exuding a more elegant and graceful demeanor.

At this moment, Song Chaobang happened to reach the entrance of Song Ruhao's room.

Song Ruhao looked at Song Chaobang, his face heavy with worry, and his heart skipped a beat.

"Father?"

Song Chaobang sighed and sat on the edge of the bed, patting his shoulder gently. In a low voice, he said, "The Emperor has issued an order to send you back to the capital and confine you to the Cold Palace."

Song Ruhao immediately sat up and was about to exclaim.

Song Chaobang sternly interrupted, “Be careful with your words! Be cautious of the consequences!”

Song Ruhao took a few quick breaths, calming down from his hysteria, and whispered, “Why? Why is he so heartless?”

“Silence!”

Song Chaobang shouted, and Song Ruhao trembled, regaining his composure.

Softening his tone, Song Chaobang lowered his voice until it was barely audible. “Don’t forget our next plan. Once your sister captures the Emperor’s attention and successfully gives birth to a dragon son…By that time, I will become a high-ranking official, and you will be on the path to becoming a Huang Guqing. A small sacrifice for a greater scheme. Hao’er, you have always been intelligent. Think carefully.”

However, it seemed he had forgotten the saying, “The walls have ears,” and the adage, “Don’t say it if you want it to be kept a secret.”

MCUS Chapter 87

Yan Ge was initially curious about how Song Chaobang managed to push Huangfu Yuchen to the point of making the decision to banish Song Ruhao to the Cold Palace. So, he released his spiritual consciousness to eavesdrop on the conversation between Song Ruhao and Song Chaobang.

Unexpectedly, he happened to hear the words, ‘Once your sister captures the Emperor’s attention’, causing him to instantly spray the tea he had just drunk all over Huangfu Yuchen’s face.

Huangfu Yuchen looked at him speechlessly, Yan Ge reached out to wipe his face while connecting his spiritual consciousness with Huangfu Yuchen’s.

Huangfu Yuchen’s eyes narrowed, and in the next instant, his figure disappeared from the room.

Song Chaobang stared dumbfounded at Huangfu Yuchen, who had suddenly pushed the door open.

Huangfu Yuchen spoke lightly, “The Grand Tutor is getting older and not suitable for long journeys. Let him return to the capital together with Song Guiren.”

Song Ruhao spat out a mouthful of blood and fainted on the bed.

Song Chaobang’s face went pale and he knelt weakly on the ground, his lips trembling, “Your Majesty, thank you for your grace—”

Huangfu Yuchen left without even Giving him a second look.

The next morning, as the team prepared to set off, two people were missing.

Jiang Gan and the others were puzzled, but since Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge didn't mention it, they didn't ask either. They would handle things accordingly.

Jun Xiang took the final version of the modified plan, which had been revised by Yan Ge, and found the record keeper.

"Your Excellency."

Jun Xiang handed the plan to him, saying, "The future development of Shuangque County can follow the instructions in the plan. When I return to the capital, I may pass through this place again. If I find that Shuangque County hasn't shown any improvement—"

The record keeper accepted the plan with both hands and spoke earnestly, "I will do everything in my power to develop Shuangque County. If I fail to do so, I will willingly resign!"

"Alright."

Jun Xiang quickly caught up with the convoy.

The convoy continued its journey south. With Song Ruhao's absence, Yan Jin's mood became even more cheerful than Yan Ge's, as he happily sang nursery rhymes. His childish voice could be heard even from the first carriage where Yan Ge was seated.

"If you love me, then stay with me—"

Jiang Gan, who had a soft spot for children, played along, "Alright, I'll stay with you."

"If you love me, then kiss me—"

"Alright, I'll kiss you—"

The two of them bantered back and forth, like a duet.

"If you love me, then praise me… hehe…"

“Alright, I’ll praise you. Our baby is both smart and adorable!”

“If you love me, then hug me…”

“Alright, I’ll hug you…”

“If you truly love me, then stay, stay with me…”

The people beside the carriage couldn’t help but reveal a knowing smile on their faces.

After passing through two small counties, the convoy finally arrived at Chaoyang City, one of the ten famous cities in the Great Han Kingdom. Along the way, they often saw pedestrians dressed like martial artists, carrying swords and knives. Some were even in groups, dressed in similar attire, their faces filled with excitement, as if something good was about to happen.

Yan Ge curiously looked outside and called Gao Feng over. “Go and inquire about it.”

“Yes.”

Huangfu Yuchen said to Yan Ge, “Let’s settle down first. We’ll know what’s going on when Gao Feng returns.”

Yan Ge said, “From what I can see, we have already stepped into the martial world.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. “Indeed, Chaoyang City is one of the gathering places for martial artists.”

After half a cup of tea, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had settled in the deluxe suite of the inn. The suite had a small living room on the outside and a bedroom inside.

Jian Gan, Yang Zhuo, and the others were also interested and were waiting for news in Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen’s room.

Just as the tea cups were served, Gao Feng returned.

“Young Master, Madam, there is indeed a major event happening in the martial world!” Gao Feng, infected by the excitement of the martial artists outside, also looked excited.

Yan Ge asked, “What’s going on?”

“Here’s what happened. Within the borders of the Mai kingdom, there is a mysterious valley called ‘Thunder Valley.’ The valley is constantly bombarded by thunder and lightning, and no one dares to approach it. But about a month ago, for some unknown reason, the thunder and lightning attacks became less frequent, and every few days, the thunder and lightning would disappear without a trace. Some bold herb gatherers entered the valley and saw the legendary Zhantian Vine. A few hundred years ago, there were ancient books that mentioned that drinking the juice of the Zhantian Vine can greatly increase one’s martial arts power. What do martial artists pursue? Isn’t it to improve their martial skills and roam the world? After hearing this news, the entire martial world boiled with excitement. People gathered together to discuss and plan to set off for Mai kingdom to seize the Zhantian Vine. It’s not just our Great Han Kingdom; martial artists from the surrounding kingdoms have also heard the news and are rushing over as soon as possible.”

Jiang Gan asked, “If it appeared a month ago, why did they decide to go see it now?”

Gao Feng’s expression became somewhat strange. “More than one person has seen the Zhantian Vine, but each time they saw it, its location was different. They suspect that the Zhantian Vine may have developed intelligence. Without complete preparation, it’s difficult to capture it.”

Jiang Gan was incredulous, “Isn’t that similar to the Ginseng Doll?”

Gao Feng shrugged, indicating that he couldn’t explain it clearly.

Huangfu Yuchen noticed Yan Ge’s unusual expression and asked, “What’s wrong?”

Yan Ge said, “Let’s go and seize the vine too!” While Jiang Gan doubted the power of the Zhantian Vine, he knew it well. Because after completing a side mission given by the system once, he received the reward of the Zhantian Vine! The miraculous effect of the Zhantian Vine was undeniable. Since there was such a treasure, it was only natural to seize it for their own use.

If it belonged to another kingdom, they couldn’t let it slip away either.

“Very well.” Since leaving the palace, Yan Ge rarely took the initiative to ask for anything, so Huangfu Yuchen gladly agreed.

Yan Ge asked, “What about the original plan?”

Huangfu Yuchen had his own ideas. “Master Jiang, you can continue heading south with the others. I don’t think I need to say much about what you should do along the way.”

Jiang Gan said, “Rest assured, Young Master. I will pay attention to the livelihood of the people and take note of what I see and hear. I will also try to find opportunities for development for some less-developed towns according to Madam’s business model.”

Deng Mande felt something was amiss. “Young Master, don’t tell me you and Madam plan to go alone?”

Yang Zhuo was also worried. “Young Master, why not let Guard Feng and Guard Yun accompany you? They have been with Madam for so long, so their cooperation with Madam and Young Master is more tacit.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “My wife and I will bring Yan Jin with us. We won’t bring anyone else.”

Yan Ge also said, “You can rest assured. With my and Chen Chen’s skills, it’s more efficient to act alone.”

He firmly adhered to the policy of calling Huangfu Yuchen “Chen Chen” whenever the other party called him “Madam” or “wife”.

“Ahem, ahem…” Several people coughed and looked down at the ground.

Huangfu Yuchen leaned close to Yan Ge’s ear and said, “I don’t mind how you address me, but you can call me ‘Husband.’”

Yan Ge smiled at him. “I can also call you Little Chen.”

The way of addressing each other had always been unresolved between them.

Huangfu Yuchen compromised, “As you wish. Ahem. This matter is settled. Our final destination is Lanhai City. You should leave clues along the way, and my wife and I will catch up after we finish our tasks. If it takes too long, we will also meet you in Lanhai City, so don’t worry.”

“Yes.”

After Gao Yun inquired about the specific location of Thunder Valley, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen didn’t delay any further. They mounted their horses and set off with determination.

While others needed to join forces to enter Thunder Valley, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had the confidence to venture alone. Now, the most important thing was to seize the opportunity. Even though they were confident in their ability to obtain the Zhantian Vine when others arrived, there was the risk of drawing unwanted attention if people found out they possessed it.

With no one else around, Yan Jin didn’t need to pretend to be a child all the time. When they reached the deserted wilderness, his bottom started to ache from riding the horse, so he simply flew.

Yan Ge thought to himself, ‘Fortunately, there is no radar in this era. Otherwise, chaos would break out if people saw a six-year-old child flying in the sky.’

The two fast horses galloped along the official road in the woods. Huangfu Yuchen reined in his horse and said, “Baby, wait.”

Yan Ge pulled on the reins, and the black steed neighed before coming to a halt. He turned around and asked, “What’s the matter?”

Yan Jin also popped his head out from Yan Ge’s embrace, looking puzzled.

Huangfu Yuchen rode his horse to Yan Ge’s side and said, “According to Gao Feng, if we push ourselves and ride day and night, we should be able to reach Senyun County, which is about three days to the west of here. But we’re not there yet. Baby, are you sure the route you indicated is correct?”

Yan Ge stroked his chin and took out the map. “Let me see…” In fact, on this journey, they occasionally encountered several martial artists riding horses in the opposite direction, which gave him a bad feeling.

Seeing Yan Ge’s eyes darting around, Huangfu Yuchen knew he was feeling guilty. He chuckled inwardly and calmly crossed his arms, observing how long Yan Ge would keep up the act.

Yan Ge felt that the telepathic connection between him and Huangfu Yuchen was becoming stronger. Even without looking at him, he knew he was laughing. He turned his head and said, “It’s not my fault, really. Blame this ancient map for being so poorly drawn and unclear.”

“Hehe…” Huangfu Yuchen chuckled softly and took the map from Yan Ge’s hand. “Let me take a look.”

Yan Ge tried to salvage his pride. “You take a look. In the future, if I get the chance, I’ll improve maps for the whole kingdom.”

Huangfu Yuchen quickly dissuaded him. “Absolutely not, baby. If you were to do that, it would be as if you’ve given other kingdoms a divine guide for invading us.”

“True.” Yan Ge snapped his fingers. “I can improve maps for other kingdoms!”

Huangfu Yuchen encouraged him with a doting expression. “Your husband will definitely support you!”

“So, do we need to turn back?” Yan Jin asked.

MCUS Chapter 88

Huangfu Yuchen examined the map, “We need to backtrack for about twenty miles, where there’s a fork in the road. We should have taken the left turn.”

Yan Ge glanced at the sky, “Let’s go back while it’s still daylight.”

The three of them sprinted all the way, returning to the fork in the road. After running along the official road to the west for about half an hour, they spotted two wanderers resting and drinking water under the shade of a tree.

Yan Ge felt that these two wanderers resembled the ones they encountered earlier when they took the wrong path. “Let’s ask, so we don’t make the same mistake again.”

Huangfu Yuchen approached on horseback at a normal speed and halted two feet away, so as not to arouse any suspicion.

“These two brothers, might this road lead to the Xiguan? My wife, son, and I are heading to the Xiguan for the first time, and we fear taking the wrong path. We appreciate your guidance,” he politely inquired.

The Xiguan Pass was a significant border fortress of the Great Han Kingdom, situated almost on the boundary between Great Han and the Mai kingdoms. Of course, Huangfu Yuchen wouldn’t disclose their intention to go to the Mai kingdom, as the fewer people who knew about it, the better their chances of seizing the Zhantian Vine.

The man In his early thirties was very generous and stood up, bursting into laughter. “I’ve seen you before, turns out you took the wrong path. But this time, you’re right. This road indeed leads to the Xiguan.”

The other man, a few years younger and resembling the middle-aged man, showed good manners and nodded to Huangfu Yuchen. He said, “Luckily, you made it back in time; otherwise, you might have had to spend the night outdoors. About twenty miles ahead, there’s a small town where you can rest.”

“Thank you both,” Huangfu Yuchen expressed his gratitude.

Yan Ge also approached on horseback and smiled, “We’re fortunate to have met you both. We do have a map, but he misread it.”

Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Jin turned their heads simultaneously, wearing the exact same expression.

The older man said, “I am Zhang Feilong, and this is my brother Zhang Feihu. Since we’re on the same path, would you be interested in traveling together?”

From this point on, there was only one road to the small town, so even if they didn’t want to travel together, they had no choice but to do so. It would be best to agree straightforwardly and then find an excuse to part ways in the town. Huangfu Yuchen clasped his hands and said, “It’s an honor. I am Luo Fang, and this is my wife Zhang Yang and our son Luo Jiacheng.” In their current travels, they might encounter some troubles, and it was inconvenient to use the Fang Zhiyuan family’s name to avoid potential future problems.

“A pleasure to meet you,” Yan Ge nodded.

Yan Jin also performed a proper salute. “A pleasure to meet you.”

Zhang Feilong and Zhang Feihu both smiled.

Zhang Feilong said, “The daylight is waning; let’s hit the road.”

“Please.”

With Zhang Feilong and Zhang Feihu leading the way, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen felt much more at ease, simply following their horses all

the way.

When they arrived in the small town, the sun was gradually setting. The remnants of sunlight hung in the western sky, casting a fiery red hue across the clouds.

The town was filled with numerous wanderers. Those who were courteous nodded to each other, while those with a hostile attitude pretended not to notice one another. There was a palpable tension in the air.

However, for the small town, it was a fortunate occurrence. With more people in town, the daily earnings of the small shops and businesses surpassed the usual.

“Master Luo, there is a small inn further ahead. However, Master Luo and Madam Luo might find it uncomfortable.” Zhang Feilong glanced at the two of them, hinting at something but without malice. He could naturally see the distinguished status of Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge— they were either rich or noble.
Yan Ge smiled and said, “When traveling, we don’t have many requirements. Our Luo family has been engaged in business for generations, wandering far and wide. We may have suffered just as much as you two brothers.”

Zhang Feihu laughed heartily, “That’s true.”

Both brothers had a favorable impression of Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. They didn’t appear like some businessmen who were full of greed, and their eyes lacked arrogance.
The Inn was indeed small, converted from a few houses, but it was fairly clean.

After settling in, the five of them had a meal together in the lobby. As the food was served, Yan Ge casually surveyed the surroundings. The modest lobby had a total of six tables, apart from their table, there were three other tables occupied by guests. One of the tables caught his attention: an old man and a pair of twins that were around eleven or twelve years old.

The old man wore a gray robe and despite his gray hair and beard, his complexion was ruddy, and he had a kind demeanor. His sitting posture exuded the air of an elder. He smiled at the twins and said, “Do you know there is another legend about the Sky-Cutting Vine?”

Three out of the four tables in the lobby were occupied by people from the martial world, and his words immediately captivated their attention. “Master, what’s the legend? Please tell us quickly!” The girl was lively and urged him on, her voice as melodious as a yellow oriole.

“Very well,” the old man said, “It is said that a long time ago, there was an immortal named Wuzai, with boundless power. He lived alone on the Tianshan Mountain, secluded in cultivation. One day, he accidentally discovered a small grass growing by the meditation cushion where he often sat. Although the grass was small, less than a finger’s length, it was green and vibrant, swaying gently in the wind as if it possessed a hint of enlightenment. He felt an inexplicable stir in his heart and decided to keep the grass, caring for it in his spare time. With the passage of time, the small grass grew larger and turned into a verdant vine that reached from the ground to the roof. Moreover, the vine could move freely. Wherever the immortal went, it would follow. Over time, the immortal could sense the vine’s emotions to some extent. He felt joy and regarded the vine as a friend.”

“But on the Black Mountain, which stood opposite the Tianshan Mountain, resided a demon named Tianteng who was notorious for his bloodlust. By chance, he learned of the existence of the immortal on the Tianshan Mountain and desired to obtain his power, thus he launched an attack. The immortal engaged in a fierce battle with the demon for nine days and nine nights but tragically suffered defeat, losing his ability to move. The demon laughed triumphantly, intending to absorb the immortal’s power. But on seeing the vine beside him, the immortal had a sudden thought. Could he transfer his entire power to the vine and let it escape far away? By doing so, the demon would be unable to obtain his power. The vine possessed some level of consciousness, so it communicated with the immortal and happily nodded in agreement. The immortal then transferred all his power to the vine. The vine, having accompanied the immortal in meditation for a long

time, had a solid foundation. With the addition of the immortal's power, its cultivation soared. Unfortunately, the immortal passed away when his power was depleted. The vine swiftly escaped at an incredible speed, finding a secluded place to cultivate. After greatly enhancing its magical prowess, the vine returned and slew the demon, avenging the immortal. In memory of the immortal, it named itself 'Zhantian,' signifying its admiration for the immortal's legacy."

The lobby fell silent for a moment. Although this tale seemed somewhat cliché, stories of punishing evildoers and dominating the world never failed to stir one's emotions. The twins were captivated by the captivating and righteous story, while others in the martial world were thrilled by the power of the vine depicted in the story.

The old man chuckled and added, "Legends, after all, are just legends. Children, don't get too carried away."

As soon as he finished speaking, a burly man with a yellow face sitting at a table in the corner snorted disdainfully and said in a coarse voice, "What's the point of this old man coming here if he doesn't want to obtain the Zhantian Vine? You're quite old, it's better to return home and rest, so you don't have to rush to buy a coffin on the way. Hahaha!"

His laughter abruptly ceased— it turned out that three peanuts were simultaneously shot at him, hitting different spots on his chest with a "pa pa pa".

"Young people should respect their elders," the old man stroked his beard and chuckled.

The three peanuts hit the acupuncture points, and the yellow-faced man, unable to speak or move, appeared to be unable to breathe. His face gradually turned more yellow, then red. He stared anxiously at the old man, unable to utter a disrespectful word.

The old man smiled faintly without any visible movement of his hands, and three more peanuts flew out.

The yellow-faced man slumped onto the bench, gasping for breath, his eyes fixed on the old man, but he didn't day show any disrespect.

Yan Ge witnessed a martial arts scene firsthand, something he had only seen on TV or in movies before. His eyes sparkled, and Huangfu Yuchen could even hear his heartbeat and the accelerated flow of his blood. He also noticed Yan Ge's hand instinctively clenching into a fist.

Amused, he said to Yan Ge, "Do you have to be so excited? Baby, your skills are far superior to that old man's." He conveyed his words to Yan Ge's consciousness through voice transmission

Yan Ge glanced at him, shook his head, and replied via voice transmission, "Ah, you can't understand the feelings of someone who has traveled through time. If you have the opportunity to go to my previous world in the future, then you will understand how I feel now."

Huangfu Yuchen's lips curved. If there was indeed such an opportunity, he would be very willing to visit Yan Ge's previous world.

Zhang Feihu wore a look of understanding and said, "Madam Luo is mostly active in the business community and probably has limited contact with martial artists, so it's understandable."

"I remember!" Zhang Feilong suddenly glanced at the old man's feet, his expression showing a mix of realization and excitement. He whispered, "If my guess is correct, this old man should be the revered ancestor of the Yangshan Sect, Master Yingzun! It is said that he is over 150 years old and highly respected in the martial world, hence being called 'Yingzun,' which means to respect. His original name is hardly known. Yingzun rarely appears in the martial world, but he has a strange hobby for wearing mismatched shoes on both feet…"

Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, Yan Jin, and Zhang Feihu all simultaneously looked at the old man's feet. True enough, although the styles of the two shoes were identical, the left one was black while the right one was gray. It was a peculiar hobby indeed.

Yan Ge asked, “Brother Zhang, who was the person that was acupunctured just now?”

Zhang Feilong’s face revealed a hint of disdain. “How should I put it? People in the world tend to classify martial artists into two categories. Madam Luo, do you know which two categories they are?”

“Righteous and evil?” Yan Ge responded.

“Correct,” Zhang Feilong nodded. “His name is Li Po. I don’t know how to evaluate him, but the word ‘evil’ is most appropriate.”

The lobby of the small inn was small, but even if Zhang Feilong spoke in a low voice, martial artists had sharp hearing, making it difficult not to overhear. Moreover, Zhang Feilong didn’t bother to lower his voice.

Li Po had just lost face in front of many martial artists and was still seething with anger. He couldn’t do anything to the old man but did he fear Zhang Feilong?

His eyes widened, and he leaped forward, wielding his knife.

Yan Ge, still playing the role of a merchant, swiftly retreated toward the wall, pulling Huangfu Yuchen along. He didn’t forget to bring Yan Jin and Zhang Feihu with them.

The tables in this inn were all accompanied by long benches. When Huangfu Yuchen was pulled back, he almost tripped over the bench, completely ruining his image. He shook his head helplessly, wondering if he should thank his lover for not forgetting to bring him along when he fled.

Yan Ge chuckled, and Huangfu Yuchen slyly gave his buttocks an ambiguous squeeze. “Be careful tonight.”

Yan Ge looked him up and down, deliberately moving in slow motion, provokingly implying —It’s you who should be careful.

A sudden fierce impulse churned in Huangfu Yuchen’s chest, his scorching gaze causing Yan Ge to feel a heat coursing through his entire body. Yan Ge

warned him with a glance.

Huangfu Yuchen curled his lips and clasped Yan Ge’s hand.

As for Zhang Feilong, since he roamed the martial world, how could he fear engaging in combat? He swiftly drew his sword, parrying the attack. The clash of blade against blade ignited a shower of sparks.

Just as the two were about to launch their second move, the venerable elder, Yingzun, lightly raised his right hand, enveloping both their wrists in an invisible force, rendering them immobile.

“Young people should not let their anger get the better of them. Be cautious not to frighten the common people,” Elder Yingzun advised with a calm tone.

Zhang Feilong and Li Po exchanged glances, simultaneously snorting in response, before retreating to their respective positions.

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The startled innkeeper, who was too afraid to move, finally dared to approach with a tray and serve the dishes on Yan Ge’s table.

In this small town, there were no famous or elaborate dishes, just some home-cooked meals like tomato and scrambled eggs, eggplant stir-fried with pork, braised tofu, deep-fried small fish, chicken stew with potatoes, stir-fried cucumber with meat, and vegetable and egg soup. Although simple, the aroma was delightful.

After finishing their meal, Yan Ge promptly paid the bill and said to Zhang Feilong and Zhang Feihu, “Brothers, I must thank you for this opportunity. It is a great fortune to have the chance to meet both of you today. If it weren’t for you showing us the way, I and… the innkeeper might have ended up wandering all the way to the North Sea.” In front of others, to save face for his beloved, Yan Ge didn’t address him as “Chen Chen” or “husband” but simply called him “his innkeeper.”

He was both courteous and humorous, his words made Zhang Feilong and Zhang Feihu laugh, so they didn’t refuse.

Yan Ge continued, “Brothers, it’s our family’s custom to take a stroll after a meal. Let’s part ways for now.”

“Very well, please go ahead.”

Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, and Yan Jin then got up and left.

Yingzun’s gaze lingered on them for a moment.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen turned back simultaneously, but Yingzun averted his gaze, smiling and nodding before shifting his eyes away.

As they walked further, Yan Ge couldn’t help but sigh, “Chenchen, those with extensive knowledge and experience are truly remarkable. Their insight is as bright as a torch. I even have a feeling that he sees right through me.”

Huangfu Yuchen wrapped his arm around Yan Ge’s waist. “Call me your ‘innkeeper’ again.”

Yan Ge glanced at him disdainfully. “Just an innkeeper. What’s there to be proud of? Bai Jushen is an innkeeper, Wen Xian is an innkeeper, Yuan An is an innkeeper, and even the owner of that small inn is an innkeeper. They’re everywhere.”

Huangfu Yuchen raised an eyebrow. “Do you think I’m unaware that ‘the innkeeper’ implies ‘husband’?”

Yan Ge spoke seriously, “I believe we should discuss the issue of titles between us. If I keep calling you ‘Chen Chen’ too often in front of others, I’m afraid some perceptive individuals might guess your identity.”

“Then call me ‘husband,’ ‘your innkeeper’ is also fine,” Huangfu Yuchen smiled.

“I’m being serious with you.” Yan Ge slapped his back with a palm.

Only then did Huangfu Yuchen seriously consider it. “Among the common people, when a man comes of age, it’s not appropriate to call him by his given name directly. Usually, a separate name is chosen to reflect his virtues. However, such a custom doesn’t exist within the imperial family. How about you give me a name that only you can use?”

Giving Huangfu Yuchen another name? Yan Ge became intrigued. “Alright, let me think. I remember reading in historical records that ancient people often used the character ‘zi’ as part of their names because ‘zi’ is a beautiful and respectful title for men. Let’s use ‘zi’ as the first character…”

Huangfu Yuchen laughed, hugging Yan Ge’s waist as they continued walking, not hindering their leisurely stroll.

Yan Jin felt utterly redundant. He took out snacks from his bag and chewed them with puffed cheeks.

“’Chen’ means beautiful jade, so let’s choose the character ‘rui,’ which also carries the meaning of auspiciousness and good fortune. The name ‘Zirui’ is quite fitting. What do you think?”

“Great!” Huangfu Yuchen took advantage of a moment when Yan Ge was distracted and pulled him into an embrace, kissing his lips. “I really like it. Inside the palace, you can still call me Yuchen, but outside the palace, call me Zirui. Only you can use it.”

Yan Ge nodded. “And what about me? It seems like I don’t have a name other than my given name. Otherwise, my father and mother wouldn’t directly call me by my name. How about you give me a name too?”

“No need. I think ‘Madam’ , ‘wife’ and ‘baby’ are good enough.” Huangfu Yuchen continued walking forward, showing a dismissive attitude.

Yan Ge had a deep sense of being taken advantage of. Helplessly rubbing his forehead, he caught up with Huangfu Yuchen. “Forget it. You’re my beloved, and it’s only natural that I dote on you.”

Huangfu Yuchen thought to himself, ‘who let you have a slight advantage in words.’

Yan Ge continued, “Let’s focus on the important matter. Zhang Feilong and Zhang Feihu are hospitable and straightforward. They might invite us to join them tomorrow. I think we should find a way to leave early.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “We’ll leave at midnight and leave them a note at the counter, saying that something urgent came up, and we had to leave first.”

“Sounds feasible.”

In the deep of the night, while everyone was sound asleep, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen quietly rode their horses and swiftly galloped into the distance under the moonlight.

After two more days of rushing on the road, the two finally arrived at the border city of Xiguan. Xiguan, being a strategic military location, was evident from its thick and towering city walls. On the walls, soldiers with dark and stern faces patrolled back and forth, radiating a formidable military presence.

At the eastern city gate, there were two long queues of people entering the city. Most of them were peasants bringing their harvest to sell in the city and merchants transporting goods in large quantities. Among them were also many dark-haired individuals with profound features. After all, being a border town, there was frequent trade between the two kingdoms. Everyone entering the city had to undergo a strict inspection by the soldiers before being allowed in. If they wanted to enter or exit through the western city gate, the same inspection was required to prevent enemy spies from infiltrating the Great Han Kingdom.

Huangfu Yuchen politely asked a middle-aged man standing in front of them, “Brother, is the inspection at Xiguan’s gate always this strict?”

The man replied, “No, it wasn’t like this before. There used to be inspections, but not as thorough as in the past few days. Recently, for some reason, there has been an influx of people from the martial world. General Cao is concerned about potential issues, so he issued a high alert and increased the scrutiny. We often bring mountain products to the city to sell, so we’re used to it.”

The climate in the west was relatively dry, and after waiting for a while, their mouths became parched. Yan Ge took out a water pouch from his bundle, he took a few sips and passed it to Huangfu Yuchen.

Yan Jin carried a small bag on his back. He took out a smaller water pouch from his bag and drank from it. It contained fruit juice.

“Papa, I’m a little hungry.”

Yan Ge glanced around and said, “We can’t enter the city, so where can we find something to eat?” Although his system backpack contained plenty of

food, it was not from this era, and it would be strange to take it out and eat it.

Huangfu Yuchen noticed a young man carrying a burden in the other queue. The burden contained several large jars emitting a delicious fragrance. He said to Yan Ge, “Watch him, I’ll go buy something for us to eat.”

Yan Ge watched as Huangfu Yuchen walked over to the young man and said something while handing him a money pouch. Warmth filled his heart, and a smile appeared on his lips, eyes, and face. He could never have imagined that an emperor would personally go and buy something worth just a few coins for them.

“A family of three?” an auntie in the neighboring queue approached Yan Ge. She had a basket hanging on her arm covered with cloth, and it could be seen that it contained eggs.

Yan Ge nodded.

The auntie smiled ambiguously, “Your husband treats his wife so well.”

Yan Ge chuckled. Auntie, why are you so sure I’m his “wife”? Just because I’m carrying a child?

“The child is so cute,” the auntie complimented Yan Jin and quietly asked, “Is he your biological child?” It seemed like she wanted to ask if he was the offspring of the husband’s concubine.

Yan Ge: “…”

Yan Ge glanced at the auntie and said, “Auntie, be careful, someone might steal the eggs from your basket.”

The auntie quickly turned around, tightened the cloth on the basket, looked around vigilantly, and stopped talking to Yan Ge.

Huangfu Yuchen walked over with a tray containing eight bowls: a bowl of vegetable porridge, a bowl of noodle soup, a bowl of white rice porridge, a bowl of plump steamed buns, a bowl of stuffed buns, a bowl of steamed

dumplings, and a bowl of noodles. The abundant food attracted the attention of people around them.

“Why did you buy so much?” Yan Ge asked.

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “I didn’t know what you would like to eat, so I bought a bit of everything. They’re still hot, so let’s eat while it’s warm.”

Yan Ge kept the steamed dumplings, stuffed buns, white rice porridge, and noodle soup for himself. The other four bowls shouldn’t go to waste, so he asked the man he had previously asked for directions if he wanted to have some. The man gladly thanked him and accepted.

The auntie couldn’t help herself and swiftly took the bowl of noodles with meat from the tray, not forgetting to say thank you.

Since there were no tables, Huangfu Yuchen placed one end of the tray on the horse’s back and held the other end, using a spoon to scoop some white rice porridge to drink.

Yan Ge tasted a dumpling and said, “It’s a bit spicy, but it’s good.” He picked up a dumpling and fed it to Huangfu Yuchen.

He then drank the noodle soup and squinted his eyes in satisfaction, “Hmm. The soup has a bit of spiciness to it, it tastes great.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “The western region is colder in autumn, winter, and spring compared to other places, so the people here prefer stronger flavors and spiciness to keep warm. Have another one.”

“Get it for me,” Yan Ge said as he gazed at Huangfu Yuchen. He was dressed in a moon-white robe, and was leaning against the horse’s belly with a relaxed and captivating demeanor. No longer serving him.

Huangfu Yuchen looked at him, not taking any action or saying a word, only smiling.

Yan Ge picked up a dumpling and deliberately stuffed it into Huangfu Yuchen’s mouth with force. Huangfu Yuchen choked on it, and he hurriedly

patted his back.

“Have some porridge,” Yan Ge scooped a spoonful.

Huangfu Yuchen opened his mouth and swallowed it, saying, “I’m fine now.”

On the city wall, a young man dressed in a bluish-gray scholarly robe was leaning on the stone railing, staring at something below. His gaze was unwavering, and his mouth watered. He wore a black cloak, similar to some of the soldiers, indicating a close connection with the garrison.

“Military advisor, what are you looking at?” a burly man in a general’s robe strode in. His features were resolute, and his face, weathered by years of sun exposure, added a touch of rugged charm.

“A feast for the eyes, it’s a feast for the eyes!” Feng Zhun didn’t even turn his head. “I’ve been stationed at the border for two years—eating poorly, sleeping poorly, having no fun or love…surrounded by rough men. It was worth witnessing this scene today!”

Cao Zhan furrowed his brows, followed Feng Zhun’s gaze, but didn’t notice anything particular.

“Do you see it?” Feng Zhun moved closer to him and nudged him with his elbow, his gaze fixed and unwavering. “Isn’t it incredibly pleasing to the eye?”

“What is it?” Cao Zhan remained expressionless.

Feng Zhun finally turned his head to glance at him but gave him a look that said, “You’re beyond redemption.”

“I mean those two men in the queue over there, both dressed in white, leading horses, and one of them even has a child on the horse. Can’t you see? Aren’t they both very handsome?”

“They are a couple.” Cao Zhan made a rare comment on matters unrelated to warfare.

“I know.” Feng Zhun continued to stare at Ya Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

Cao Zhan: “They are well-matched.”

“I know.” Feng Zhun replied impatiently. Suddenly, the slightly stern-looking man glanced in their direction, and their eyes met from a distance. His first thought was, “Could that man have overheard his conversation with Cao Zhan?” But then he realized how foolish that was. How could he hear from such a distance?

“So, no matter which one of them catches your eye, you don’t stand a chance,” Cao Zhan objectively analyzed.

Feng Zhun turned his head to stare at Cao Zhan. “I want to curse someone’s father.”

Cao Zhan pointed at a rat that had crawled out of a hole in the wall. “Try its father.”

“Get lost!”

Huangfu Yuchen looked at Yan Ge and smiled, raising his hand to gently stroke his hair.

“We’re finally getting close,” Yan Ge patted the horse and urged it forward.

Yan Jin had eaten and drank his fill, and now he lay on the horse’s back, sleeping soundly, with a trace of drool at the corner of his mouth. He had a safety strap invented by Yan Ge tied to his back, so there was no worry of him falling off the horse.

It was now Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen’s turn. Huangfu Yuchen handed over their shared baggage and Yan Jin’s small backpack to be inspected. As the soldier was about to take them, a figure rushed over and squeezed in front, immediately taking the two bags.

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Feng Zhun scanned Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen with his eyes, a smile on his face, and gently asked, “Welcome to Xiguan Pass. May I inquire about the purpose of your visit? If you are here for sightseeing, I, Feng Zhun, am well acquainted with Xiguan Pass and can serve as your guide during your leisure time.”

Huangfu Yuchen coldly stared at him.

Yan Ge chuckled as he observed this peculiar person, unable to detect any impure thoughts in his eyes. “We are merchants, hoping to explore potential avenues for profit here.”

“You’re welcome to develop business here,” Feng Zhun replied. “I also have a keen interest in commerce—”

Before he could finish his sentence, Cao Zhan approached, snatched the two bags from the soldier, and pulled Feng Zhun aside expressionlessly, nearly causing him to stumble.

“It’s time for him to take his medicine.”

With those words, Cao Zhan dragged Feng Zhun away.

After passing the inspection, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were finally allowed to enter the city. Upon entering, they were taken aback by the bustling presence of martial artists. The sudden influx of martial artists into the city could spell trouble if it was part of a large-scale operation against the court. It was no wonder General Cao was so nervous and conducting thorough investigations.

Meanwhile, in a mysterious room in a mysterious location in Xiguan Pass, a conversation between two mysterious individuals took place.

“Master, the individuals we’ve been keeping an eye on have arrived.”

“They have finally arrived. Proceed according to the plan.”

“Yes.”

“The day after tomorrow, I will have to return. If anything happens while I’m away, report to the Deputy Sect Master immediately.”

“Yes!”

—

Yan Jin slept soundly on the horse. His face was peaceful, but his complexion was paler than usual.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were focused on finding an inn and didn’t notice.

Once they secured a room in the inn, Huangfu Yuchen laid Yan Jin on the bed to rest while he went out to gather information.

In the past few days, the large influx of martial artists had alerted the vigilant General Cao at the city gates. The investigation of martial artists from Great Han was conducted with great severity, as many of them disguised themselves as merchant caravans. Moreover, the incident In the Thunder Valley was similar to what they had heard before. It was evident that martial artists had well-connected sources of information.

After discussing their options, the two of them decided to enter the Mai Kingdom in secret. The longer they delayed, the more unfavorable it would be for them.

“I’ll go call Little Jin,” Yan Ge walked to the bedside and called out twice, but Yan Jin showed no response. Realizing something was wrong, he grabbed Yan Jin’s wrist to check his pulse.

“What’s wrong?” Huangfu Yuchen glanced at Yan Ge and also noticed something unusual. He hurried over a few steps and asked, “What’s happening to him?”

Yan Ge turned his head, a solemn expression on his face, “I’m certain there’s nothing wrong with his body, but he won’t wake up.”

Huangfu Yuchen was startled, gripping his shoulders tightly as he anxiously examined him from top to bottom. “And you? Are you feeling unwell?” He hadn’t forgotten that Yan Ge had emphasized the importance of being cautious and was worried that Yan Jin’s abnormal condition would endanger him.

Yan Ge shook his head, suddenly thinking of the system. He attempted to open it but was unsuccessful. The light screen that had appeared before did not reappear, and his expression changed. “I can’t even open my backpack.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s heart sank. He held Yan Ge’s hand tightly, fearing that he would disappear before his eyes.

“Little Jin! Little Jin!” Yan Ge shook Yan Jin harder, but there was still no response.

This unprecedented situation caused both of them to exchange serious glances. Huangfu Yuchen’s mood grew even heavier, and he wondered if Yan Ge’s life was in danger.

“Could it be a breakthrough in his cultivation?” Huangfu Yuchen wrapped his arms around Yan Ge’s waist.

Yan Ge furrowed his brows. “It shouldn’t be. There was no such situation in his previous breakthroughs… Zirui, what should we do?” For the first time, he showed a helpless expression in front of Huangfu Yuchen. He worried about Yan Jin and himself. In this world, he had finally obtained so much happiness and didn’t want to lose it.

Huangfu Yuchen embraced him tightly. “Nothing will happen, baby. I will never allow anyone or anything to take you away from me. Let’s not panic

for now. Since Yan Jin's body seems normal, it means he's temporarily not in danger. Didn't you say that the Zhantian Vine has extraordinary effects? I'm thinking that it might be effective for Yan Jin as well. Let's go find the Zhantian Vine."

"Yes, the Zhantian Vine!" Yan Ge finally relaxed a bit, regaining his composure. "The Zhantian Vine must be useful!" Since the backpack couldn't be opened, he could only rely on the Zhantian Vine.

The two quickly packed their things. Yan Ge wrapped Yan Jin in a cloth and carried him on his back. They left the inn and arrived in a sparsely populated corner, swiftly passing by the patrolling soldiers without attracting attention, and like a gust of wind, disappeared into the distance. Before long, they arrived at the checkpoint guarded by the soldiers. They followed the established plan and avoided people's gazes, heading towards the Thunder Valley.

At the Thunder Valley, they saw dense lightning pouring down like rain, resembling a long snake in the distance, causing their expressions to change once again. With such dense lightning, even with their current cultivation, entering the valley would undoubtedly lead to certain death.

Moreover, they were not the only ones at the valley's edge.

The martial artists from various kingdoms guarding the valley were startled by the sudden appearance of the two white-clad figures, and their eyes were filled with shock.

Who were these two? Their lightness skills had reached an unimaginable level!

Huangfu Yuchen gently squeezed Yan Ge's hand, transmitting his voice. "Baby, let's get some information first."

Yan Ge nodded slightly and turned to look at the others, wearing the same pleasant smile as always.

Apart from the three of them, there were over thirty people at the valley's edge. A middle-aged man in his forties stood alone, with a sturdy build and brown hair. There was a refined middle-aged man and a middle-aged beauty who were intimately interacting with each other. There was also a young man in his twenties lazily sitting under a large tree, dozing off with a stalk of grass in his mouth. Three elderly men in their sixties wearing similar costumes; one man leading fifteen or sixteen disciples; Two young men sitting with fierce faces, and loose braids that made one wonder how much time it took to comb their hair every day.

Except for the young man sleeping under the tree and the couple, no one looked like the people of Great Han Kingdom.

These people were all very leisurely and seemed to be waiting for something.

Yan Ge turned his head and surveyed the Thunder Valley. The valley was deep, reaching a depth of kilometers from the cliff edge to the bottom. However, the slope was not very steep, so it wouldn't be difficult to descend. Due to the frequent lightning strikes, there wasn't much vegetation at the bottom of the valley. Only the most robust species with extraordinary vitality could survive after being struck by lightning. A few lucky trees had never been struck, so they remained lush and verdant.

"Esteemed senior," Yan Ge respectfully bowed to the nearest middle-aged man with a robust build, "I seek your guidance. May I ask why there is so much lightning in the Thunder Valley today? Do you know when the lightning will cease?"

The middle-aged man had a kind face but appeared indifferent. His gaze remained fixed on the Thunder Valley, showing no response as if he hadn't heard Yan Ge's words at all.

Huangfu Yuchen was not surprised, they were all competitors since they had come here. He led Yan Ge to the couple in front of them and spoke politely, "If I'm not mistaken, both of you are from the Great Han Kingdom. Could you kindly enlighten us about the Thunder Valley?"

The man remained silent, while the beautiful woman smiled and glanced at Yan Ge curiously, asking, “Are you all family?”

“Indeed, I am Luo Fang, and this is my wife, Zhang Yang,” Huangfu Yuchen said, being very courteous.

The beautiful woman chuckled, her smile even more enchanting. “It’s quite rare for you to bring your son along for an adventure in the Thunder Valley.”

Because they needed information, Yan Ge was patient. “As newcomers to the world of martial arts, we humbly seek your guidance.”

“Very well,” the beautiful woman smiled alluringly. “I am willing to offer my guidance. One of you may spar with me. If you win, I will reveal everything I know about the Thunder Valley without holding back.”

Huangfu Yuchen understood that Yan Ge was actually very anxious and patted his shoulder. “I am Luo Fang, and I am willing—”

“Don’t believe her words.” The young man who had been sleeping sat up lazily, speaking casually. “It seems like you two are truly new to the martial world. Pei Jinde and Huang Shuya, known as the ‘Deceptive Duo,’ are notorious for their trickery. Few people have been able to escape their deception. You two should not believe her words.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s expression turned slightly cold.

“Well then, would this young hero be willing to tell us?” Yan Ge asked.

“I am willing,” the young man stood up, spat out the piece of grass from his mouth, “but I also want to spar with you. I noticed earlier that your lightness skill is quite formidable, so I assume your martial arts are also impressive. If you can defeat me, I promise to disclose everything truthfully.”

“Very well,” Huangfu Yuchen smiled faintly, a hint of sinister coldness in his smile. “Please.”

The others gathered closer, their expressions filled with anticipation. Since they were bored waiting, witnessing a good show was exactly what they desired.

The middle-aged beauty sneered and said to Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, “Do you know who this young man is? His name is Zhong Xie, known as ‘Xiao Tianxie’ in the martial world. He is infamous for his wickedness, both in character and martial arts!”

Yan Ge smiled without saying a word, and Huangfu Yuchen remained unfazed. They were not afraid. If this young man dared to play tricks on them, they would beat him until he confessed.

“Zirui, be careful.”

Huangfu Yuchen gave him a reassuring glance.

Zhong Xie unsheathed his sword and glanced at Huangfu Yuchen, inquiring, “What about your weapon?”

“No need,” Huangfu Yuchen replied calmly.

Zhong Xie furrowed his brow, “I am serious.”

Huangfu Yuchen simply nodded, saying, “Please.”

With his sword raised, Zhong Xie thrust towards Huangfu Yuchen’s chest. This move appeared casual, as if it were a straight and direct thrust, but halfway through, the sword technique transformed, and the sword qi surged and fluctuated. Suddenly, it changed direction, aiming to strike Huangfu Yuchen’s neck with incredible speed.

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Upon seeing Huangfu Yuchen dodge to the side, everyone wore an unsurprised expression.

At this moment, the middle-aged man with brown hair spoke up, “I have long heard that Xiaotian Xie from the Great Han possesses a wicked character and a cunning martial skill. Even some people with higher martial skills have been defeated by him. Seeing him in person today, it is indeed quite remarkable.”

Huangfu Yuchen estimated that he had had enough after about a hundred moves, and his figure suddenly flickered, shifting to Zhong Xie’s left side. They stood side by side in opposite directions. With his right fist, he slapped below Zhong Xie’s right elbow, and the latter let out a low cry as he helplessly watched his sword slip from his hand and soar into the sky. It then descended and pierced three inches into the ground.

He turned to look back at Huangfu Yuchen with shock, and with a sudden twist, he flew sideways. Seizing the sword with his right hand, he spun around and launched an unexpected attack towards Yan Ge.

Huangfu Yuchen didn’t even blink.

Yan Ge Was carrying Yan Jin on his back but he remained unaffected, displaying his agility as he gracefully flipped in mid-air. He positioned himself above Zhong Xie, placing his right foot on his back. With a forceful push, he landed lightly on the ground. Zhong Xie, on the other hand, crashed heavily onto the ground, emitting a muffled groan. It was evident that Yan Ge showed no mercy with that maneuver.

Pei Jinde and the others looked at the formidable duo with shock. When did such powerful characters emerge in the martial world?

The foreign visitors wore shocked expressions, tinged with caution.

Huangfu Yuchen gazed deeply at Zhong Xie. He didn't urge him, but the coldness in his eyes made Zhong Xie aware that if he dared to go back on his word, there would be dire consequences.

Zhong Xie sighed, got up, and dusted off his clothes. "After observing for many days, I've noticed that the thunderstorms disappear without a trace every three days. Tomorrow is the day when the thunder will vanish. However, despite this, there are still areas on the ground where the mighty power of thunder strikes lingers. Three days ago, I witnessed with my own eyes a hot-blooded fellow who couldn't restrain himself and jumped into the valley. He was struck by lightning and turned into a charred corpse, like a dried fish."

Yan Ge asked, "Is the Zhantian Vine really inside?"

Zhong Xie replied, "That's what they say, but no one has seen it with their own eyes. I have looked for those herb pickers who claim that Thunder Valley contains the Zhantian Vine but found nothing. Either these people don't exist at all, or someone with ill intentions has already silenced them."

Yan Ge frowned. "Zirui, if the herb pickers don't even exist, it's highly likely that the news about the Zhantian Vine was intentionally spread."

"No matter what, I'm going in to take a look," Huangfu Yuchen said, encircling his back with his arm. "Baby, you understand. If we can't resolve that matter, it will always be a hidden danger. I'm worried."

Yan Ge emphasized, "We'll go together."

Huangfu Yuchen curled his lips, not arguing with him.

Zhong Xie sheathed his sword and slung it over his shoulder, leisurely walking away.

“Hey, where are you going?” Huang Shuya looked at him with confusion as he moved farther away from Thunder Valley.

Zhong Xie turned around and said, “With those two present, even if the Zhantian Vine truly exists, I can’t get a part in it. I’d better retreat of my own accord.”

Yan Ge stood with his arms crossed, watching him. Indeed, Zhong Xie’s character was truly wicked. Just now, he had cooperated so well that he thought Zhong Xie had finally become honest. But now, it was clear that he had deliberately put him and Huangfu Yuchen at odds with everyone present.

Sure enough, Pei Jinde and the others looked at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen with vigilance.

Zhong Xie smiled mischievously at Yan Ge and leisurely walked away, his steps becoming lighter. Suddenly, he felt a sharp pain in his back. He let out a hoarse cry and turned around to see a pea-sized green fruit on the grassy ground. If it were a sharper hidden weapon, or worse, a poisoned one, he would undoubtedly be dead!

He looked towards the direction of Thunder Valley with horror. Huangfu Yuchen looked at him calmly, while Yan Ge had a smirk on his face. Zhong Xie let out a bitter smile, bowed apologetically to the two of them, rubbed his neck, and quickly left.

Seemingly oblivious to the attention they received, Huangfu Yuchen surveyed their surroundings, then led Yan Ge to a spot behind two closely positioned trees. The area was surrounded by tall grass that reached shoulder height, creating a secluded small space. Huangfu Yuchen took out a small blanket from his bundle and laid it on the ground. He carefully helped Yan Jin on the blanket, covering his abdomen with another small blanket.

“Wife, please have a seat and rest for a while,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

Yan Ge sat on the ground and took out an oiled paper package containing two pieces of beef. He used his internal energy to heat them up and handed one piece to Huangfu Yuchen.

Pei Jinde, Huang Shuya, and the others exchanged glances and sat down, taking out their dry rations to eat. Their thoughts were similar: this couple's martial arts skills were indeed impressive, and their chances of obtaining the Zhantian Vine were greater than theirs. It would be better to deal with them after they obtained the vine.

Yan Ge chewed his food slowly, occasionally glancing at Huangfu Yuchen. They saw each other almost every day, and it seemed like he didn't miss or care about him much. But the thought that they might truly never have a chance in future made him unable to resist stealing more glances. The feelings between him and Huangfu Yuchen were not intense or deeply engraved, but each day was real, and every small memory was filled with happiness and joy. Everything was so beautiful, so beautiful that he couldn't help but fear it was all just a dream.

Huangfu Yuchen grabbed Yan Ge's hand in surprise. "Why are you pinching yourself so hard?"

Yan Ge snapped out of his thoughts and placed both hands on Yuchen's shoulders, deeply kissing his lips.

Huangfu Yuchen gently responded to his kiss.

"Zirui," Yan Ge whispered against his ear, calling his name softly.

"I'm here," Huangfu Yuchen interlocked their fingers, pecking his cheek lightly. Their rings touched closely.

"I love you."

Huangfu Yuchen's body trembled slightly as he tightly embraced him. "You fool, I know."

Yan Ge pushed him away and continued eating the beef. “This beef must have been boiled in water. It’s too tough, like chewing wood. I’ll have to think of a way to improve it when we get back.”

“Then I’ll charge you,” Huangfu Yuchen said solemnly.

Yan Ge burst into laughter.

After finishing their meal, they gave some water to Yan Jin. He was currently asleep, and since they were in the wilderness, they couldn’t feed him liquid food. However, Yan Jin was not an ordinary person, and his body wouldn’t be affected by not eating for a few days.

Feeling full and satisfied, Yan Ge yawned. “I want to take a nap.”

Huangfu Yuchen allowed him to rest his head on his lap. “Sleep peacefully, I’ll keep watch.”

Yan Ge nodded and nestled against his leg, his face buried in Huangfu Yuchen’s abdomen to escape the sunlight. After days of continuous travel, he was indeed fatigued.

Before long, Huangfu Yuchen could discern that Yan Ge’s breathing had become steady, indicating that he had fallen into a deep sleep.

He carefully flattened the bundle and gingerly placed Yan Ge’s head on top, covering his face with a handkerchief to shield him from the light. He then took out a small delicate porcelain bottle from his personal pouch and scattered some insect repellent powder around. With light steps, he walked to the edge of the cliff.

Once he confirmed that he could still see Yan Ge and Yan Jin when he turned around, he stopped and carefully observed the bottom of the valley. The lightning continued to strike with resounding crashes, its formidable force undiminished. Lightning mostly appeared on cloudy and rainy days, but even on clear days, Thunder Valley had such frequent and intense lightning, indicating an unusual reason behind it.

He had a feeling that if he could discover this reason, they would be able to enter the valley successfully. And after observing for a long time, he actually made a discovery.

Every move made by Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen attracted the attention of others. With Yan Ge asleep, the focus of everyone's attention shifted solely to Huangfu Yuchen. At this moment, some martial artists from the martial world hurried over. When they saw that everyone was looking at Huangfu Yuchen, they also glanced over but couldn't fathom the reason.

Pei Jinde and the others maintained a tacit understanding and said nothing, lest they attract more opponents.

Huang Shuya exchanged a glance with Pei Jinde, who then got up and walked to Huangfu Yuchen's side.

Huangfu Yuchen pretended not to notice, his expression calm and inscrutable.

"Master Luo, have you discovered something?" Pei Jinde asked in a hushed tone.

Huangfu Yuchen remained silent. He once again turned his head to ensure that Yan Ge and Yan Jin were still safe, and continued to gaze expressionlessly at the valley below.

Pei Jinde said, "As you've mentioned before, we are all citizens of Great Han, descendants of the same ancestors, and in a smaller sense, we are fellow villagers. If you have indeed discovered something, you can trust me and tell me. We can cooperate and enter Thunder Valley together, for there is strength in numbers. Master Luo, does what I say make sense?"

"It does," Huangfu Yuchen expressed his doubts, "However, when my wife inquired about Thunder Valley earlier, why didn't I hear you say these words?"

"You've misunderstood me and my wife," Pei Jinde said earnestly, "Those people are all foreigners, and we pretended to keep our distance from you to

have the opportunity to collaborate in secret and act at the right time."

Huangfu Yuchen thought to himself that Pei Jinde truly lived up to his reputation as the "Master of Deception," as he said both flattering and negative words.

"I have indeed made a discovery. The slope on this side is steeper compared to the other side. If we want to descend to the bottom of the valley, it's best to go down from the opposite side," Huangfu Yuchen said.

Pei Jinde was momentarily speechless. Before he could respond, someone from the other side laughed and shouted, "Who's there? Searching for treasures while carrying a child?"

Worried that they might wake up Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen swiftly used his lightness skill and flew over. "The child is feeling unwell, and he's finally fallen asleep. Please lower your voice."

Upon hearing this, the young martial artist immediately fell silent, showing an apologetic expression and bowing to Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, indicating that there was no need to apologize.

Pei Jinde, who was standing at a distance, was annoyed by the untimely interruption. If only he could have a few more words with Huangfu Yuchen, he was certain he could gather some information.

Author's note: Foreigners: Referring to people from other kingdoms.

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Suddenly, the sound of dozens of footsteps echoed through the air, their intensity and speed mirroring each other, growing increasingly closer. Huangfu Yuchen released his spiritual awareness, his expression turning stern.

He stood In front of Yan Ge and Yan Jin, peering through the trees with a cold gaze towards the direction of the approaching group.

The others looked at each other in bewilderment.

In a short while, a group of black-clad individuals swiftly approached, forming a curved formation, subtly encircling Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge.

The strong killing intent emanating from them was impossible for Yan Ge to overlook. As soon as his eyes opened, his arms swiftly pulled Yan Jin into his embrace. With a leap, he stood side by side with Huangfu Yuchen.

“Wife, take care of yourself and our son. I will handle this.” Huangfu Yuchen’s tone was sharp and imposing.

“Understood.” Yan Ge moved aside, holding Yan Jin, making room for Huangfu Yuchen.

“What’s going on?” Huang Shuya asked Pei Jinde in confusion.

Pei Jinde shook his head. “It’s probably that young couple’s enemies.”

At this moment, more people from the martial world arrived at Thunder Valley from different directions. Seeing the scene unfolding here, they approached curiously.

People of the martial world feared nothing but the absence of excitement. Among them were Zhang Feilong, Zhang Feihu, as well as Elder Yingzun and his twin disciples, whom they had encountered at the inn.

Zhang Feilong and Zhang Feihu hurriedly walked to Yan Ge's side upon seeing Huangfu Yuchen being surrounded.

"Madam Luo."

Yan Ge apologized, "Brother Zhang, the two of us left without saying goodbye back then. We didn't want to involve you."

Zhang Feilong said, "What are you talking about? Our encounter was destined. We will help—"

Yan Ge interrupted, "No need, Zirui can handle it."

"Master, who are those people? They have dark faces, they look scary," the little girl Fang Ling pouted.

Although everyone had the same question, no one paid her attention. None of them could discern the origin of these black-clad individuals. How could the old man, whom the martial world had never seen before, know?

But Elder Yingzun said, "They are members of the Centipede Organization. This organization specializes in targeting wealthy merchants and nobles, plundering their wealth. They are not good people. Ling'er, Xiao Jie, in the future, when you see them, stay far away."

Fang Jie responded nonchalantly, "Master, didn't you say they target nobles and wealthy merchants? But we are not."

"Not now doesn't mean it won't happen in the future." Fang Ling glared at him.

"The Centipede Organization…" Pei Jinde racked his brain, trying to recall, and finally remembered. "So it's them! They are not really part of the martial world."

“In other words, those two are either wealthy merchants or nobles?” Huang Shuya remarked.

“It seems so,” Pei Jinde confirmed.

Huangfu Yuchen drew his sword without uttering a word and declared coldly, “Come at me together.”

Seeing Huangfu Yuchen’s imposing stance, they realized that in order to deal with Yan Ge, they had to first take care of him. The leader of the Centipede Organization glanced at Yan Ge and hesitated for a moment before raising his hand, signaling his subordinates to surround Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen sneered, leapt into the air, and his figure spun rapidly. His sword aura danced like mist, swift as lightning, as several dazzling sword lights flashed by. Before anyone could closely observe, Huangfu Yuchen had already landed, with the tip of his sword aimed at a black-clad figure beneath his foot, crimson blood dripping from the sword’s edge. Meanwhile, the remaining black-clad individuals lay lifeless, their vital organs pierced by his sword.

The onlookers were all shocked.

“Who ordered you?” Huangfu Yuchen asked.

The black-clad man’s pupils contracted. He wanted to bite his tongue and end his life, but he found that his jaws no longer obeyed his command, barely having any sensation left.

“You…”

Without hesitation, Huangfu Yuchen raised his sword and severed the man’s left arm.

The man’s face turned deathly pale, lacking even the strength to let out a pained scream.

Fang Ling, frightened by the scene, took refuge behind Elder Yingzun, casting a curious glance at her master whom she remembered as always being cheerful. To her surprise, he was still smiling and did not stop the cold man before her.

Huangfu Yuchen raised his sword once again. “This time, it’ll be your right hand.” To a martial artist, the right hand was like another heart. Losing the right hand meant being unable to wield a weapon ever again.

The black-clad man widened his eyes in terror, his throat struggling to produce a muffled sound. “It’s…”

Huangfu Yuchen brushed his fingers against the man’s body.

The restraints on the black-clad man were lifted, and he gasped for breath heavily. “As subordinates, we only follow orders from above. I don’t know much. I only know that the Vice Leader of the Centipede Organization is a woman, while the Leader is from a foreign kingdom. I have only seen the Leader from a distance and never spoken to him. Truly, I only know these things.”

From a foreign kingdom? Huangfu Yuchen inquired, “Do you know the identities of my wife and I?”

The black-clad man weakly shook his head. His left arm was losing too much blood, causing his mental state to deteriorate.

Yan Ge approached him. “We have already changed our appearances. How did you accurately track us?”

The black-clad man replied, “The orders from above stated that we should follow a deeply affectionate couple, one of whom is always smiling, and there is a six-year-old child.”

Yan Ge was speechless. Had smiling become a death sentence?

Huangfu Yuchen raised his sword and cut the man’s throat.

“He already spoke, yet you still killed him. You lack integrity,” Fang Jie commented. It seemed he felt emboldened in the presence of Elder Yingzun, believing that Huangfu Yuchen wouldn’t dare do anything to him.

Fang Ling shot him a disdainful look. “These people are heartless killers. What integrity can you expect from them? Do you think he would survive after failing his mission and returning? Isn’t that right, Master?”

Elder Yingzun smiled but remained silent.

Huangfu Yuy paid no attention to the others and led Yan Ge to the side.

“I am certain that their leader must know our true identities. It’s very strange. They were able to track us because you love to smile seems somewhat far-fetched. Baby, I feel like we have overlooked something. The person behind all this fills me with dread, but I can’t put my finger on why.”

Yan Ge was startled, and a sense of vigilance arose within him. He transmitted his thoughts, “Zirui, a cultivator’s premonition should not be underestimated. Could there truly be a massive conspiracy unfolding in the shadows? But I don’t have a similar feeling as you do. Could it be that the Centipede Organization targeted me in order to get you?”

“Me?” Huangfu Yuchen found it highly unlikely. “Would killing me destroy the Great Han Kingdom?”

Yan Ge held Huangfu Yuchen’s hand tightly. “With so few clues at the moment, we shouldn’t speculate too much and risk being led astray. Regardless of their intentions, since they haven’t launched a larger-scale siege, it means they aren’t fully prepared yet. Moreover, all of their people are now dead, unable to transmit the information in time. This will somewhat hinder their future plans.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. “The most important thing right now is to obtain the Zhantian Vine. And what about you? Are you feeling any discomfort? If you’re not well, you must tell me.”

Yan Ge shook his head. “Don’t worry, I’m fine.”

“And Little Jin? How is he?”

“Other than not waking up, everything is the same as before.” Yan Ge handed Yan Jin over. “My hand is sore.”

Huangfu Yuchen instinctively reached out, his hands grasping Yan Jin by the armpits, his arms straight and his body tense.

The comical sight lightened Yan Ge’s mood considerably. “Do you have to hold Little Jin as if you’re holding dynamite every time?”

“You just wanted to laugh at me.” Huangfu Yuchen sighed helplessly, awkwardly pulling Yan Ge closer, one arm embracing his waist, allowing his head to rest on his shoulder. He guided Yan Ge towards a tree. “Let’s sit down over there.”

The rest of the people watched them sit down as if nothing had happened, and they were unsure whether to admire their calmness or be wary of their ruthlessness.

At night, everyone fell asleep amidst the sound of thunder.

As soon as day broke, the thunder ceased. In the absence of flashing lightning strikes, the valley became clearer. The uneven valley floor was dotted with small hills and depressions, making it impossible to see the entire extent of the valley. Only a few plants added a touch of green to the black soil.

By now, a hundred people had gathered at the edge of the Thunder Valley. Impatient to obtain further information, they rushed towards the valley floor. However, before taking a few steps, they were struck down by lightning erupting from the ground, screaming in agony as they fell motionless to the ground.

Pei Jinde quietly said to Huang Shuya, “Keep an eye on them.” He was referring to Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen

Yan Ge looked at Huangfu Yuchen with confusion. Why weren't they going down? What were they waiting for?

But he believed that Huangfu Yuchen had his reasons for doing so, so he remained still, calmly observing the people in the valley.

Some, despite hearing the screams, continued forward without fearing death, while others hesitated, deeming it unworthy to risk their lives for a legendary plant like the Zhantian Vine whose existence remained uncertain.

Elder Yingzun didn't go down either. Pointing at a pale red plant on top of a hill, he said to his two disciples, "That's the precious medicinal plant called 'Proud Mountain Red,' which thrives in places with frequent thunderstorms."

"It's valuable?" Fang Jie's eyes gleamed.

Fang Ling patted him on the back, her smile brimming with amusement, yet her tone was quite fierce. "If you're not afraid of death, then go down."

Zhang Feilong and Zhang Feihu exchanged glances, nodded, and made up their minds.

Zhang Feilong said to Yan Jin and Huangfu Yuchen, "We'll go ahead."

Yan Ge had a favorable impression of them and advised them tactfully, "It's extremely dangerous down there. You two don't have to take the risk."

Zhang Feihu chuckled, "Madam Luo, we understand your intentions. However, we're willing to give it a try. If we can obtain the Zhantian Vine, there's a chance to revive our Feiliu Mountain Sect."

Yan Ge had no choice but to abandon his persuasion. "Zirui and I came for the Zhantian Vine as well. If we have to fight you two later, please forgive us."

Yan Jin had been asleep since yesterday, without even waking up once, and Zhang Feilong and Zhang Feihu had already noticed that something was wrong.

They guessed he was the reason Yan Ge wanted the Zhantian Vine, which they could understand. Smiling bravely, Zhang Feilong said, “Don’t worry too much, we’ll rely on our own abilities.”

“Please,” Yan Ge also replied.

After Zhang Feilong and Zhang Feihu descended, Huangfu Yuchen glanced at Pei Jinde and Huang Shuya casually, secretly reminding Yan Ge, “Baby, it seems that the Pei couple has deduced something. Be cautious of them plotting against us.”

Yan Ge was curious. “What exactly did you discover?”

Huangfu Yuchen imitated his mysterious demeanor. “You’ll know soon.”

Unwilling to accept this, Yan Ge took a few steps toward the edge of the cliff, gazing intently below, scanning back and forth, but he didn’t notice anything unusual.

Huangfu Yuchen’s lips curved slightly, but he remained silent.

“Brother, shouldn’t we also go down?” the gray-robed old man said to the black-robed old man.

The black-robed old man replied, “Wait a little longer.”

The purple-robed old man grew impatient. “Still waiting? I saw two boys almost reach the center earlier, but they weren’t struck by lightning even once. If we don’t go down now, they might seize the Zhantian Vine.”

The black-robed old man’s voice grew stern. “Wait!”

The other two dared not say anything more.

A faint scream echoed from the valley floor — another person was struck by lightning.

The martial artists at the cliff’s edge became even more restless, gathering in small groups and discussing among themselves.

At that moment, a long green shadow leaped from the ground and disappeared before anyone could see clearly.

Someone excitedly shouted, “It must be the Zhantian Vine!”

More than one person saw the green shadow, and the martial artists could no longer restrain themselves, rushing down in a frenzy. However, as they reached the valley floor, several were struck by lightning, and the screams echoed one after another. Some young heroes, lacking composure, immediately turned back in fear.

“Aren’t you tired?” Huangfu Yuchen pulled Yan Ge back and made him sit down again.

Yan Ge looked at his posture and sensed there was still something to wait for. For the first time, his curiosity was piqued to an extraordinary level as he stared intently into Huangfu Yuchen’s eyes, as if he could find the answer by fixating on them.

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled lightly but chose not to speak.

“Brother, shouldn’t we go down as well?” the gray-robed old man asked the black-robed old man again.

The black-robed old man replied, “Just a little longer.”

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Yan Ge said, “You didn’t sleep much last night. Rest for a while, lean on my shoulder.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded and closed his eyes, leaning against Yan Ge.

Huang Shuya whispered to Pei Jinde, “Why are they still sitting?”

“Be patient,” Pei Jinde said, his gaze filled with deep contemplation as he observed Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, speculating about their identities. These two young individuals were incredibly composed and stood out among the younger generation of martial artists. Although they possessed formidable martial skills, they might not be from the martial world. Otherwise, they would have heard of them before.

Meanwhile, Fang Ling and Fang Jie grew impatient as well, but seeing Elder Yingzun closing his eyes to rest, they didn’t dare to disturb him. They played and laughed from nearby. Among the people at the edge of the Thunder Valley, apart from Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, and the unconscious Yan Jin, they were probably the only ones at ease.

As the sun gradually moved towards the west, more and more people gathered at the edge of the Thunder Valley, numbering over a thousand. The number of people struck by lightning also increased.

Yan Ge had become numb to the scene below and no longer paid attention. Bored, he plucked a blade of grass and intended to flick Huangfu Yuchen with it, but he hesitated, not wanting to disturb his rest. Instead, he skillfully weaved the grass into a butterfly and handed it to Fang Ling, while the grasshopper was given to Fang Jie.

Delighted by the gifts, the two siblings obediently moved away to play elsewhere.

After awhile, Huangfu Yuchen opened his eyes and glanced at the sky, estimating that there were still about two hours until sunset.

Yan Ge handed him the grass ring and said, “Here, it’s for you.”

Huangfu Yuchen hooked his lips, accepting the ring and actually putting it on his finger.

Yan Ge reached out to take it back. “Don’t embarrass yourself.”

Huangfu Yuchen moved his hand behind his back. “Who cares?”

Yan Ge let it go and brushed off the grass on his clothes. “Are we ready to go?”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. “You carry Yan Jin.” He instructed Yan Ge to bend down, placing Yan Jin on his back. Then he used a piece of cloth to wrap Yan Jin securely, tying it in front of Yan Ge’s chest. With one of Yan Ge’s scarves, he looped it around Yan Jin’s neck, securing the ends on Yan Ge’s shoulders to ensure Yan Jin’s comfort during any vigorous movements.

Seeing them finally making a move, Huang Shuya knocked her numb leg and nudged Pei Jinde.

To prevent others from overhearing important information, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had been communicating through voice transmission.

“Zirui, the lightning strikes in the valley haven’t completely ceased. It seems we can only rely on our reflexes to avoid the lightning strikes from underground,” Yan Ge said.

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “I have a plan.”

Yan Ge smiled. “Finally going to share it? I’m listening.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “After observing for a long time yesterday, I accidentally discovered that no two lightning bolts strike simultaneously. This difference is extremely subtle, only discernible to individuals with our visual acuity and keen perception. Others might find it difficult to notice. Therefore, I have a rather unusual conjecture. The previous lightning strikes were so dense because they were pursuing a specific target. If I’m not mistaken, they were chasing after the Zhantian Vine.”

Yan Ge was taken aback, but he didn’t show it on his face, signaling with his eyes for Huangfu Yuchen to continue speaking.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Zhong Xie mentioned that the subsequent thunder strikes after the lightning stopped were residual strikes, but that’s not entirely accurate. I believe that the so-called ‘residual thunder strikes’ are actually attacks from the Zhantian Vine.”

Yan Ge was surprised, “But as far as I know, the Zhantian Vine doesn’t have the ability to create thunder and lightning.” When he obtained the Zhantian Vine from the system, the system didn’t mention anything about lightning power, and it couldn’t have hidden this information from him.

Huangfu Yuchen continued, “This is just my speculation after observing for a long time. Everyone assumes that since the Zhantian Vine is a plant, it must live on the surface. However, in my opinion, the Zhantian Vine can also burrow into the ground or even live underground. Therefore, there is only one way to catch it. I will lure it out, and when the lightning strikes, you attack with all your might—”

“No!” Yan Ge’s face turned pale. He finally understood what Huangfu Yuchen was planning. Huangfu Yuchen’s method was essentially sacrificing himself. The Zhantian Vine was important to him and Yan Jin, but Huangfu Yuchen was equally important to him. He couldn’t sacrifice his loved one for the sake of the Zhantian Vine. The thunder strikes in the Thunder Valley were no joke. Even though he and Huangfu Yuchen had made progress in their cultivation, if they were hit, they would undoubtedly be severely injured or worse.

Huangfu Yuchen smiled lightly and rubbed his face with his thumb. “Do you think I would do something without confidence? We will be together forever, and I won’t let anything happen to myself. When the time comes, I will circulate my true essence to resist the thunder strikes—”

Panic engulfed Yan Ge’s heart, and he couldn’t listen to what Huangfu Yuchen was saying. He shook his head repeatedly, “No, no, no! We can think of other ways. You once said that once you have obtained something, you don’t want to lose it. I feel the same way, I don’t want to lose you. Absolutely not…” He pulled Huangfu Yuchen back, as if by doing so, he could make him give up his idea.

“Baby!” Huangfu Yuchen held onto him tightly, imprisoning him in his embrace. “Calm down! We have to do this. Maybe after dark, the thunder will continue to descend, and we only have two hours. If we can’t get the Zhantian Vine today, we’ll have to wait another three days, and Yan Jin might not be able to wait that long. I won’t let anything happen to you!”

Yan Ge took a deep breath. “Fine, let’s go down. But my cultivation is higher than yours, so I’ll be the one to attract the thunder.”

Huangfu Yuchen teased him, making him smile, “Are you teasing me on purpose? We’re both in the late stage of the Enlightenment realm.”

“Who’s teasing you!” Yan Ge’s face turned serious, “I started cultivating earlier than you, and my realm is more stable than yours. That’s just a fact, okay?”

“Don’t be silly,” Huangfu Yuchen remained unfazed, “I started martial arts training at the age of four. Do you think your physical strength can surpass mine? Baby, be rational.”

Their actions were so conspicuous, and their frequent eye contact was a clear sign they were communicating using voice transmission. More and more people started to become suspicious of them.

Pei Jinde approached, cheerfully saying, “Why not share what you know with everyone and discuss it together? Many hands make light work.”

Yan Ge smiled and looked at him, his gaze seemingly passing over the bodies of the fallen black-clad men on the ground, conveying an unmistakable warning.

Pei Jinde's smile stiffened, and he forced out a laugh, shutting his mouth.

"Are they also going down?" Fang Ling asked in surprise, looking at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

Fang Jie replied, "It seems so."

"But…" Fang Ling had a fondness for both Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, taking a step forward as if wanting to run over and persuade them.

Elder Yingzun smiled faintly and said, "No one can stop them."

"Baby, you will face as much pressure from the Zhantian Vine as I do," Huangfu Yuchen patiently explained to Yan Ge. "As long as you deal with the vine quickly, its lightning strikes won't be able to harm me anymore. I believe you won't let anything happen to me. Do you believe in me?" Huangfu Yuchen stared at him, the tenderness in his eyes melting Yan Ge's heart.

Yan Ge stared at him for a long time, then suddenly laughed. Yes, he should trust Huangfu Yuchen, and he should trust himself as well. No matter what happens, they will face it together.

Yan Ge slapped his hand hard, causing Huangfu Yuchen to wince in pain. Yan Ge also winced.

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at him helplessly and said seriously, "Once I restrain the Zhantian Vine, you attack the underground with full force. Even if you can't kill it, you must injure it and quickly feed its essence to Yan Jin."

Yan Ge nodded. At this point, there was no point in saying anything more.

"Let's go, time is running out," Huangfu Yuchen said, looking at the sky.

The two of them leaped towards the bottom of the valley.

“Should we follow them?” Huang Shuya asked her husband quietly.

Pei Jinde clenched his teeth and said, “Yes, if we wait for them to obtain the Zhantian Vine before trying to snatch it, there will be too many people vying for it. It’s better to take a chance now.”

“I’ll follow your lead,” Huang Shuya said, trustingly.

With the lightening gone, the gray-robed old man grew anxious again. “Elder brother?”

The black-robed old man remained expressionless, uttering just one word, “Wait.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s intention was to lure out the Zhantian Vine, unlike others who hesitated and acted cautiously. He gathered some true essence at the soles of his feet and walked toward the valley at a normal pace.

Yan Ge followed closely behind, his gaze fixed on Huangfu Yuchen’s back. Both palms were facing the ground, and he was ready to attack. A few drops of sweat trickled down his forehead and slowly slid down his cheeks.

“Zirui, I’m right behind you. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Yan Ge’s voice resonated in Huangfu Yuchen’s mind, and he smiled faintly. “I believe in you.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s composed demeanor caught everyone’s attention, and they all unconsciously walked to the edge of the cliff, observing the scene below.

“Ah!” A scream came from ahead.

“Let’s go over there!” Huangfu Yuchen said to Yan Ge, displaying his lightness technique as he flew towards the direction of the sound.

Yan Ge followed closely behind.

Pei Jinde was bewildered and astonished, “Why did they specifically rush towards the location of the lightning strikes?”

Huang Shuya couldn’t comprehend it either, so she didn’t dwell on it. “Should we follow or not?”

Pei Jinde hesitated for a while, unable to make up his mind. After a moment of hesitation, he said, “I think they’ve gone mad. Wife, in life, we often have to learn when to let go. I suggest we don’t follow them. Otherwise, I’m worried…”

Huang Shuya smiled and shook her head. “No need to say more, I understand. Then let’s go up. Actually, if we seriously think about it, with our current skills, we can already live a a carefree life. Isn’t that right?”

The two of them smiled with relief, turned around in unison, and climbed up the cliff.

The people on the cliff burst into laughter, exclaiming, “If you’re afraid of death, then don’t come!”

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When Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen arrived, there was only a charred corpse on the ground. The deceased's features were distorted and unrecognizable, with hair, eyebrows, eyelashes, clothing, and accessories melted and fused together into a disgusting lump, emitting a pungent smell and emitting a bluish smoke.

Huangfu Yuchen gestured to Yan Ge and suddenly waved his palm towards the ground. The ground trembled slightly, revealing a fierce crack.

Almost simultaneously, a faint static sound rang out.

Huangfu Yuchen stared attentively at the ground, and in the next instant, a powerful force swiftly surged into his feet, spreading throughout his body like an exploding bundle of gunpowder. His whole body trembled violently, he was nearly numb, and he closed his eyes in intense pain. A hazy gray mist obscured his vision, making it almost impossible to see anything clearly. He couldn't hear any sound either, as if the entire world had fallen into silence, giving him a momentary sense of being in a different dimension.

However, all this occurred in an instant!

"Zirui!" Yan Ge had been keeping a close eye on him and immediately noticed the change. In a panic, his first instinct was to reach out and pull him away.

"Don't touch… me… I'll… draw you in…" Huangfu Yuchen's legs felt as if they had been cast in molten iron, rendering him unable to exert any force. With great difficulty, he managed to shift a few inches to the side,

intending to shout and stop Yan Ge, but his voice came out weak and fragmented. He could only use his eyes to signal Yan Ge: Attack!

Yan Ge suddenly regained clarity and gathered true Qi in his palms. Two enormous orbs of pure white True Qi quickly condensed, emitting a hissing sound. The orbs shot out rapidly, striking heavily beneath Huangfu Yuchen's feet.

In an instant, the entire valley trembled. Accompanied by a thunderous roar, a sharp and eerie scream emerged from underground. Then, the ground trembled again, forming a mound that swiftly moved towards Yan Ge's location.

Huangfu Yuchen's clothing was tattered, and everything below his knees appeared gray. He gasped lightly, raised his right hand, and shaped his True Qi into arrows that swiftly shot out. The underground entity seemed provoked, changing direction and swiftly circling around Huangfu Yuchen, occasionally revealing sharp, green leaves that looked like jaded teeth.

Yan Ge saw Huangfu Yuchen trembling under the lightning's assault, and his eyes turned red. He dropped to one knee, clenched his fists like two massive axes, and smashed them onto the raised mound of earth.

Boom!

Another piercing screech echoed as if someone had suddenly pulled up a piece of cloth, causing the ground to ripple and tilt. A green figure burst out from the soil, ferociously pouncing towards Yan Ge.

"Zirui, it's out! Don't lure it towards your direction anymore!" Yan Ge yelled at Huangfu Yuchen. He didn't have a chance to turn back and look at him, as he confronted the attacking Zhantian Vine that was closing in on his face.

Indeed, the Zhantian Vine was a vine, over five meters long, with a thickness comparable to an adult's arm. It had a dark and shiny surface resembling a hard iron rod. The vine was covered with palm-sized green leaves with jagged edges. As the vine screeched, its body trembled, and the

leaves stiffened, resembling numerous venomous snakes with mouths wide open, revealing sharp teeth. Its tail whipped against the ground, leaving deep craters in the ground.

Huang Fu Yuchen fell to the ground. He struggled to bend his stiff legs and sat cross-legged. He mobilized the remaining less than forty percent of his true qi to resist the thunderous energy that had invaded his dantian. True qi flowed through his meridians, inadvertently dissipating some of the thunderous energy. Surprisingly, Huangfu Yuchen discovered that the thunderous energy was being dissolved as it flowed along his meridians. His mind stirred, and he quickly divided more true qi to generate additional thunderous energy, circulating it continuously.

The thunder energy gradually dissipated at a slow pace, and his bodily senses recovered slightly. Overjoyed, he centered his mind and continued to circulate true qi, occasionally emitting one or two silver-white flashes of electric light that sizzled in the air. He seemed to have transformed into a miniature electric field.

The battle between Yan Ge and the Zhantian Vine grew increasingly intense. Yan Ge’s body was marked with scars from the leaves.

The Zhantian Vine, unable to overcome Yan Ge for a long time, finally erupted in anger. It let out a piercing scream to the sky, resembling a ladle of water suddenly poured into a frying pan. Countless electric threads sprouted from the bottom of the valley, shimmering and twisting in the air, displaying a wicked and ferocious demeanor.

“Good heavens!” Those who witnessed this scene at the cliff couldn’t help but exclaim. Even though they were not acquainted with Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge, and even held the idea of taking the Zhantian Vine from them after they obtained it, their perspective had now shifted. At this moment, they sympathized with Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

In their eyes, the bottom of the Thunder Valley resembled a rainstorm of electricity, with Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen trapped in the midst of this thunder storm. It was not only a certain death, but also the possibility of being struck to ashes by lightning, leaving no trace behind.

Fang Ling and Fang Jie, the two young children, had never witnessed such a brutal and ruthless scene. They stared with wide eyes, their faces pale as snow.

Yan Ge was caught off guard, and was struck by two electric attacks. He let out a muffled groan and fell to the ground. Due to the need to protect Yan Jin who was on his back, he had to bear the full force of the attacks. The lightning left a large black mark on his abdomen. Soon, more electric currents surged toward him like flies drawn to a scent.

Huangfu Yuchen remained calm and placed both palms on the ground. The electric currents immediately changed direction and flowed towards him. Huangfu Yuchen, with his slightly recovered body, was once again struck. His cheeks were burned and blackened, and his eyes were swollen, leaving only two slits.

“Zirui!”

His appearance at this moment tore Yan Ge’s heart apart, but he hardened his heart and did not look at him. He wielded his sword angrily and slashed at the Zhantian Vine. The sun gradually set, and in the fiery red sky, a dazzling white light flashed by. The Zhantian Vine let out a sharp and miserable scream. Half of the vine was severed and fell to the ground, quickly withering and devoid of vitality. The green sap oozed from its roots, falling on the sparsely scattered grass, causing the grass to grow several inches in just a few blinks, and the leaves became even greener.

The black-clothed old man at the edge of the cliff smiled and glanced at the gray-clothed and purple-clothed old men. He whispered, “Once Madam Luo inflicts heavier damage on the Zhantian Vine, we will make our move.”

“Brother is wise!” the gray-clothed old man said. “However, the situation is about to erupt. Once we make a move, others will definitely follow suit.”

The black-clothed old man dismissed it, saying, “I have observed that although the people present have some reputation, they are no match for the three of us. You two will be responsible for stopping the others, and I will deal with the Zhantian Vine.”

The gray-clothed and purple-clothed old men said in unison, “Yes, Brother.”

Fang Ling felt a chill down her spine from the strange smile on the black-clothed old man’s face. She asked Elder Yingzun, “Master, who are those three old men over there?”

Elder Yingzun replied, “They are the three elders of the Cult of Xiehuo from the Kingdom of Saha: Elder Black Tiger, Elder Gray Eagle, and Elder Purple Marten. Elder Black Tiger excels in boxing, Elder Gray Eagle excels in lightness skills, and Elder Purple Marten excels in leg techniques.”

Fang Jie sneered, “Even someone from a cult can be called ‘’Elder’’? They’re far inferior to Master.”

“Fang Jie!” Fang Ling reprimanded her lightly.

Fang Jie fell silent, not daring to speak further.

Huang Shuya interjected, “Don’t underestimate them. The reputation of Elder Black Tiger and the others resounds even in our Great Han Kingdom. Ten years ago, they came to the Central Plains and challenged the three seniors of Mount Tailun. They fought three battles and won all three.” She and Pei Jinde had just returned from the valley floor, where they had been mocked by everyone, but they both paid no mind to it.

“They’re that formidable?” Fang Ling was astonished. “Mount Tailun is one of the top ten martial arts sects in our martial world.”

“Indeed,” Huang Shuya nodded.

Seeing that Huangfu Yuchen was meditating and seemed to have no major issues for the time being, Yan Ge relaxed slightly.

However, he was locked in a stalemate with the Zhantian Vine, and both his physical strength and true qi were declining. He felt that continuing like this was not a solution.

Elder Black Tiger noticed that Yan Ge’s combat power was declining and signaled to Gray Eagle and Purple Marten. The three of them soared like

birds and swiftly headed towards the bottom of the Thunder Valley.

“Master! They are up to no good!” Fang Ling exclaimed anxiously.

“Stop them!” Fang Jie shouted and was about to charge forward.

Elder Yingzun lightly tapped on their shoulders, halting their movements. He soared like a falling leaf, silently intercepting the path of Black Tiger and the others, displaying his extraordinary lightness skills that surpassed even Elder Gray Eagle.

“Who are you?” Elder Gray Eagle asked impatiently, issuing a warning. “Old man, you’d better step aside. The three of us are not to be trifled with.”

Elder Black Tiger’s gaze inadvertently swept over the old man’s feet and he was immediately taken aback. Calmly, he said, “Indeed. Those who recognize the situation are truly remarkable. Since you have no connection with them, why bother with this matter?”

Elder Yingzun gently stroked his beard, smiling kindly and wisely. “If you don’t take advantage of someone’s vulnerability, I won’t participate in the competition for the Zhantian Vine. How about that?”

“Refusing a toast only to be forced to drink, puh!” Elder Purple Marten grew angry and kicked out his leg.

Elder Yingzun smiled faintly and effortlessly nullified the attack.

Elder Black Tiger and Elder Gray Eagle exchanged a glance and joined the battle.

The sky was growing darker, and the sun was about to set.

Yan Ge grew increasingly anxious. He had to deal with the attacks from the Zhantian Vine while trying to recall the information about it that he had obtained. All things in the world had their weaknesses. The Zhantian Vine must have one too.

Yes, it was its roots! Even if it could fly in the air, its life source remained in the roots!

With this realization, Yan Ge soared into the air, continuously attacking different parts of the Zhantian Vine's vines and trunk. Whether his strikes hit or not, he swiftly changed targets, his figure moving up and down, left and right, and spinning rapidly around the it.

In order to defend against his attacks, the vine had no choice but to follow his movements. Although it possessed intelligence, it was ultimately not human and couldn't think comprehensively like a human. After a short while, its movements slowed down compared to before.

The opportunity had come! Yan Ge's eyes sharpened, and he flew towards the Zhantian Vine, using a move called 'Thunder Strikes from the Heavens.'

His figure flashed, and he circled around to the back of the vine's roots. Gripping his sword tightly with both hands, he ruthlessly stabbed down.

Roar!

The Zhantian Vine let out a miserable cry, and its body trembled. It suddenly stood upright but remained stuck in the ground like a pillar. It then violently rolled in the air, its tip bending, fiercely lashing towards Yan Ge.

To protect Yan Jin, Yan Ge had to bend over and the vine struck him heavily on the chest. He let out a muffled groan, and a mouthful of thick blood spilled from the corner of his mouth.

"Baby!" Huangfu Yuchen's heart was in turmoil. He rushed over and tightly pressed his body against the Zhantian Vine. "Attack it now!"

"Zirui!" Yan Ge tightly gripped his sword, infusing his true qi into the blade, striking directly into the body of the Zhantian Vine. The vine trembled violently, finally exhausted of strength, and fell to the ground, emitting occasional low groans, resembling painful cries and desperate moans.

Yan Ge was panting, “You have gained intelligence, and I don’t want to treat you this way. But I need your essence to save my beloved and child.”

He took out a porcelain bottle that he had prepared in advance and placed it at the severed part of the Zhantian Vine’s roots. His hands trembled slightly, and he took two deep breaths to steady himself before catching the vivid and viscous essence.

“Yuchen, hold on a little longer. I’ve obtained the essence!”

The porcelain bottle half-filled, Yan Ge hurried to Huangfu Yuchen’s side, his eyes almost welling up with tears. Huangfu Yuchen, in his current state, bore no resemblance to a human being. Not only had his hair and eyebrows been completely singed, but under the tattered clothes, his entire body was charred. If it weren’t for the rise and fall of his chest, Yan Ge wouldn’t have dared to ascertain whether he was still alive. He supported Huangfu Yuchen’s nape and poured the essence into his mouth.

“You first…” Huangfu Yuchen’s tender gaze slid across his heavily wounded chest.

Yan Ge shook his head, his voice hoarse. “You first! There’s still plenty…”

Huangfu Yuchen opened his mouth, his eyes filled with a warm smile, assuring him that he was fine.

Indeed, the essence of the Zhantian Vine worked wonders. Huangfu Yuchen’s complexion visibly began to recover at a rapid pace. Yan Ge seemed as though he wanted to cry and laugh at the same time. “You look so hideous now.”

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled softly. “But I won’t let you go.”

“Mm.”

Huangfu Yuchen urged, “You should also have some…”

———

At an undisclosed location at Xiguan…

“What?! Our forces have been completely wiped out? A bunch of wastes! How did this happen?”

“Please spare us, Master. We don’t have any further information at the moment.”

“Continue investigating! I have to rush back. I’ll leave matters here to the Vice Master. Remember, you must capture Yan Ge alive!”

“Yes!”

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Yan Jin opened his eyes at this moment, looking at everything unfamiliar before him with confusion. “What has happened?”

Yan Ge abruptly turned his head and exclaimed incredulously, “Yan Jin, you’re awake!” Yan Jin had been tied to his back, so when he turned, Yan Jin turned along with him.

Yan Jin asked, puzzled, “I’m awake. What’s wrong with Father?”

A mix of relief, joy, and confusion filled Yan Ge’s heart, finally merging into a sense of helplessness. He sighed, “It’s good that you’re okay.”

Many martial artists were swiftly approaching the valley. The priority was to leave this place. Yan Ge helped Huangfu Yuchen up and took a few steps, glancing back at the Zhantian Vine lying on the ground with some reluctance. The vine had gained enlightenment; it was, in essence, a living being. It had been grievously wounded by their actions, but it was truly innocent.

Only then did Yan Jin take notice of the Zhantian Vine. “You obtained the Zhantian Vine? It has gained enlightenment; it’s truly a treasure. Father, if you’re willing to sacrifice a Foundation Building Pill, it can be saved by consuming one.”

Huangfu Yuchen disagreed. “It’s too dangerous.”

Yan Jin said, “It’s enlightened, so it can perceive the benefits of the Foundation Building Pill. It won’t harm us. Trust me.”

Yan Ge swiftly inserted a Foundation Building Pill into the wound of the Zhantian Vine. However, before he could put the vine away in his

backpack, it disappeared into the ground like a flash of lightning, leaving no trace.

Yan Ge wasn't particularly concerned. Huangfu Yuchen was fine, Yan Jin was fine—these were his greatest gains.

"Let's go." He embraced Huangfu Yuchen's waist, allowing him to lean against him, and swiftly fled.

The martial artists arrived at the valley floor, cursing and swearing as they realized it was empty.

Back at Xiguan Pass, Yan Ge carefully disguised the three of them before settling in at an inn.

Huangfu Yuchen's condition had improved somewhat compared to before, which relieved Yan Ge and filled him with admiration for the miraculous effects of the Zhantian Vine.

Supporting Huangfu Yuchen, Yan Ge walked towards the edge of the bed. Impatient with his slow pace, he decided to carry him horizontally and lay him on the bed.

Huangfu Yuchen opened his mouth to speak, but seeing Yan Ge's indifferent expression, he closed it again. With his current physical condition, he wouldn't be able to argue with him, so he might as well conserve his energy.

Since the battle at Thunder Valley, the mysterious connection between them had deepened, allowing Yan Ge to keenly sense Huangfu Yuchen's current state of embarrassment. Yan Ge secretly chuckled in his heart. He grasped Huangfu Yuchen's wrist, feeling his pulse. "Your pulse is stronger, and your recovery is going well. Zirui, is there anything uncomfortable?"

"No, I'm fine." Huangfu Yuchen held his hand in return, reassuring him to relax.

Yan Ge said, “Lie down for a while. I’ll have the attendant prepare hot water for your bath.”

Huangfu Yuchen coughed lightly. “Wait until I’ve fully recovered before you help me bathe.”

“Why are you being so stubborn?” Yan Ge looked at him with bewilderment. Once his body recovered, he would be able to move freely. Helping him bathe seemed excessive.

Huangfu Yuchen remained silent, coughing once again, turning his head away, displaying an unusual sense of embarrassment.

Yan Ge found it amusing, and his eyes flickered with understanding. He curled his lips and leaned closer, half-lying on him, and kissed him on the lips. “Alright, I’ll help you wash when you’re better.” Whether it’s a man or a woman, everyone wants to show their best side to their significant other.

Yan Jin weakly said, “Can you please put me down first? My stomach hurts, and I need to go to the restroom. I’ve been holding it in since I woke up.”

Only then did Yan Ge realize that Yan Jin was still on his back, so he quickly set him down. Yan Jin swiftly slid off his back and rushed outside, clutching his stomach.

“Where’s the restroom? Where’s the restroom!”

Before Yan Ge could even respond, Yan Jin had disappeared from sight.

Yan Ge shook his head helplessly and had the inn attendant bring some hot water. He took a bath himself to wash away the dirt and grime.

Yan Jin walked back into the room, shaking off the water from his hands. He approached Yan Ge and asked, “Papa, what exactly happened? Why do you and Father… look so miserable?”

Yan Ge lightly slapped his buttocks. “I should be the one asking you! You’ve been unconscious for more than two days, and your backpack couldn’t be opened. Zirui and I were extremely worried that something

might have happened to you. With no other options, we placed our hopes on the Zhantian Vine. We went to Thunder Valley, fought with the members of the Centipede Organization, and had a battle with the vine. Little Jin, what is going on? Why did you fall asleep for no reason? If it's because of your cultivation, you should have told me in advance."

Yan Jin rubbed his head in confusion. "Unconscious for over two days? I feel completely fine. It's just that my stomach was uncomfortable and it got better after going to the restroom. Is it because the soup was too spicy? You never let me eat anything too spicy before."

Upon hearing his words, Yan Ge felt relieved but still had some doubts. "Could it be because of the soup? Does sleeping for so long have to do with it being too spicy?"

"It should be," Yan Jin replied, "I'm certain that everything is fine with me." He was referring to the 'system,' and Yan Ge understood.

Since Yan Jin said so, Yan Ge could only accept this forced explanation. "I think we should keep some spare pills outside in case the backpack becomes inaccessible again…"

Huangfu Yuchen was also worried. "Little Jin, you should also drink some essence from the Zhantian Vine."

Yan Jin nodded. "Yes, it's a good thing. Papa, you can also have a drop or two. But not too much, as your body might not absorb it all at once."

"Understood."

Yan Ge's injuries were not light, but much better than Huangfu Yuchen's. He consumed two drops of the essence of the Zhantian Vine, then he sat cross-legged on the ground, absorbing its essence. The pain in his body gradually disappeared, and the torn flesh and skin began to heal and mend.

Yan Jin, on the other hand, took a big sip. Being a spiritual body, drinking more had no adverse effects on him, only benefits.

Half an hour later, Yan Ge was the first to finish. The pain in his body completely vanished, leaving no scars. Not only that, but his cultivation also greatly improved. Although he was still at the late stage of the Enlightenment Realm, his state of being was much more stable than before.

Yan Jin followed suit.

Huangfu Yuchen, however, didn't fully recover until after nightfall. His cultivation also advanced. Perhaps due to the "tempering" of lightning, his entire aura was more intense, with deep and sharp eyes that seemed capable of transforming into tangible blades, piercing through anyone who dared to meet his gaze.

Yan Ge kept his word and personally helped Huangfu Yuchen take a bath.

The two of them got busy in the bathroom while Yan Jin pretended not to notice, burying his head in the pillow and falling into a deep sleep.

To prevent people from the martial world from tracking them, the next day, at dawn, the three of them changed to another inn and reverted to their Fang family identities. After leisurely enjoying their morning meal, they strolled around the city.

Although the Zhantian Vine had been taken by someone else, there was no reduction of martial artists in the city. They moved around with serious expressions, searching for the whereabouts of the Luo family of three, unaware that the "Luo" family was right under their noses.

The sky over Xiguan Pass was azure, vast, and majestic. The city walls were tall and sturdy. Its beauty was different from the nobility of the capital or the gracefulness of the Jiangnan region. Instead, it possessed a unique kind of beauty—bold, rugged, and unrestrained. The people here even spoke louder than those in other places. However, due to the dry climate and relatively poor agricultural conditions, the region was not prosperous. Fortunately, there were frequent merchant caravans coming and going, barely maintaining the city's economic status as average.

It could be imagined that the conditions of the soldiers guarding the city were not good either. After Emperor Huangfu Yuchen ascended the throne, he allocated more silver for the border troops stationed at Xiguan Pass as a subsidy. However, having money didn't make much of a difference when they couldn't eat or use good things.

Yan Ge saw several off-duty soldiers gathering at a small eatery from a distance. They ordered one meat dish and four vegetarian dishes, eating heartily with radiant smiles on their faces. It left a bitter taste in his heart.

Huangfu Yuchen understood his thoughts. "I have also considered the issue you are thinking about. However, the Western region is full of mountains, and the official road from the Central Plains to Xiguan Pass is extremely winding. It's not easy to transport supplies here. Since we can't rely on imports, we can only focus on development. Do you have any ideas, wife?"

Yan Jin ran to a nearby stall and took out a few copper coins from his small money pouch. He handed over three yam pancakes, keeping one for himself, and handed one each to Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. He opened his mouth wide, and took a big bite.

Yan Ge also took a bite. "It tastes good."

Huangfu Yuchen took the pancake and handed a handkerchief to Yan Jin. "Your mouth is full. People who don't know might think we are mistreating you."

Yan Jin tilted his face and grinned, gesturing for him to wipe it.

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at him and had no choice but to wipe it.

Yan Ge chuckled inwardly. Yan Jin had learned to be cunning now, knowing that in public where there were many people, Huangfu Yuchen wouldn't dare to treat him poorly.

After laughing, he casually said, "Zirui, since we've come here, let's stay a few more days."

Huangfu Yuchen was taken aback.

Yan Ge looked at him with a smile, and said through voice transmission, “I am willing to work with you to build a prosperous Great Han Kingdom. You are ruler over everything, and I will assist you in developing the economy. Isn’t that great?”

Huangfu Yuchen gazed deeply at him and replied, “Yes. Let us join hands and work together.”

“Mother!” Feng Zhun and Cao Zhan were drinking in a small tavern when, by chance, they glanced out the window and saw two handsome men exchanging affectionate glances. Feng Zhun got excited and rushed to the window, exclaiming, “I am so lucky! In just a few days, I have encountered two pairs of beautiful men. It seems I should come out more often when I have nothing to do.”

Cao Zhan looked at him expressionlessly and asked, “You mentioned before that here, even if one desires to love, it is difficult to do so. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” Feng Zhun took a sip of his drink and casually responded, while his eyes remained fixed on Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

Cao Zhan inquired, “What about me?”

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“Pfft—” Feng Zhun sprayed wine all over. “You’re so ugly!” After some thought, he politely refused, “Getting involved in a romantic relationship with someone from the military camp can easily affect official duties.”

“No, it won’t,” Cao Zhan insisted. “I promise, if you violate military regulations, I will punish you, and the punishment will be even harsher than for others.”

Feng Zhun: “…” You’re an idiot!

“What do you think?” Cao Zhan urged.

Feng Zhun solemnly replied, “I think we should drop this matter. I believe that you will always prioritize official affairs. But I don’t believe in myself.”

Cao Zhan: “…”

Yan Ge beckoned to an idle man on the street.

The idle man saw that the three of them dressed extravagantly and hurriedly ran over with a smile.

“Young Master, what can I do for you?”

Yan Ge reached into his purse and pulled out a handful of copper coins mixed with some silver, which he handed to the man. “We’re from out of town and planning to buy some local specialties to bring back as gifts. Inquire about what this place is famous for, in terms of food, clothing, accommodation, and other aspects. If you gather detailed information, I will reward you handsomely.”

“No problem, Young Master. Leave it to me.”

Yan Ge nodded. “We’ll continue walking down this street. You should be able to find us.”

“Yes, yes, you go ahead. I’ll come back and report soon.” The man had plenty of companions nearby, and with a shout, three or four more people emerged and ran off into the distance with him.

Just as Yan Ge was about to put away his purse, a person suddenly appeared in front of him, staring at him with a beaming smile.

“Young Master, ask me anything you want to know. I’ve lived here for several years, and there’s nothing I don’t know about this place. I don’t need any rewards, just treat me to a meal.”

Yan Ge found it amusing. He had seen this person before. Wasn’t he the one who suddenly rushed over to check their identities when they entered the city?

Huangfu Yuchen glanced coldly at Feng Zhun and walked to Yan Ge’s right side, creating a separation between the two.

Feng Zhun didn’t mind at all. He continued to gaze at Huangfu Yuchen, full of admiration, and sincerely said, “Please don’t be offended, I just genuinely appreciate both of you. I absolutely have no ulterior motives.”

Unable to bear it, Huangfu Yuchen returned to Yan Ge’s left side, but he still wanted to express his ownership— he held Yan Ge’s hand.

Cao Zhan followed a few steps behind and noticed that the common people were staring. He rubbed his nose and called over a boy of around eleven or twelve years old that was helping his parents buy groceries.

“General Cao, do you need anything?” Most people in the city recognized Cao Zhan.

Cao Zhan said, “The strategist has had too much to drink today, and I’m afraid he might cause trouble that would damage the image of the border

troops. You stick with him. If he gets hungry, use this money to buy some food."

"Okay!" The young boy happily ran over and followed Feng Zhun from a distance.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen both noticed, but they didn't pay much attention to a young child.

Yan Ge found Feng Zhun quite interesting and made a gesture of "please," saying, "Could this brother accompany us for a stroll?"

"Certainly, certainly, please." Feng Zhun showed a delighted expression. "I am Feng Zhun, the military adviser to General Cao Zhan, stationed here. May I know how to address the two of you?"

Yan Ge replied, "So you are the esteemed military adviser. I offer my respects. I am Shu Shi, and it seems that you have already noticed, this is my husband Fang Zhiyuan. And this little one is our son, Fang Shijie."

Huang Fu Yuchen nodded, his lips slightly curved.

"So you are Master Fang and Madam Fang. It's a pleasure to meet you. The happiness and warmth of the Fang family is truly enviable," Feng Zhun said with a smile. "You can call me Feng Zhun, or Master Feng will also do. Calling me 'esteemed military adviser' would be too formal."

"In that case, we shall address you as Master Feng," Yan Ge said. "To be frank, our Fang family has been engaged in business for generations, and this time we have come to the Xiguan Pass with the intention of expanding our business here. The trade here is not prosperous, which presents an opportunity for us. We truly appreciate Master Feng's efforts in enlightening us about the situation at Xiguan."

"This is indeed a major matter, and I cannot refuse. I will do my utmost." Feng Zhun showed a pleased expression. "Come, let me take you for a tour. Although the Xiguan Pass may seem desolate, it is actually full of treasures. For example, the locally produced potatoes are tastier than those from other

places. They can be roasted, boiled, or stir-fried… they are delicious no matter how they are prepared. Even the potatoes consumed in the palace often come from the Xiguan Pass."

Yan Ge looked at Huangfu Yuchen, wondering if it was true or not.

Huang Fu Yuchen nodded.

"Another example is the local hemp, which is used to make clothing…"

Along the way, they encountered the few idle men returning, and Huangfu Yuchen gave them money to send them away.

Yan Jin strolled along, spending money from his pocket to buy delicious food and interesting items, stuffing them into his small backpack. Many of them were gifts for the little prince.

Yan Ge was truly worried that the little prince would not appreciate his efforts and instead scold him for buying so many fun and interesting gifts – wouldn't it be inviting resentment?

But he and Huangfu Yuchen didn't stop Yan Jin, knowing that he would stop once his pocket money was spent.

Feng Zhun watched as Yan Jin, a six-year-old kid, counted out the correct amount of copper coins from his purse to pay for each purchase, and be couldn't help but admire his parents for their good parenting.

After following Feng Zhun through half the city, they took a break and had lunch at a restaurant. Feng Zhun insisted on paying the bill, and Yan Ge estimated that Feng Zhun was afraid they would regret their decision to open a business in Xiguan Pass after seeing its desolation, so he let him pay.

After the meal, they moved to the adjacent teahouse. However, the teahouse did not have separate private rooms, so they had the owner set up a folding screen In the corner to create a secluded space.

Yan Ge didn't plan to let the First Company compete for profit in the Xiguan Pass with other merchants, so it didn't matter even if their

conversation was overheard by others.

“I wonder if Master Fang and Madam Fang have gained anything this morning?” Feng Zhun asked.

Yan Ge teasingly turned to Huangfu Yuchen and said, “Master Fang, why don’t you speak first?”

Having been together with Yan Ge for a year, Huangfu Yuchen had learned a few tricks, so he had some ideas in mind. He didn’t decline and directly said, “Potatoes are indeed a good item, but due to their abundant supply, the prices are not high. Most people can afford them, and some have already had their fill. Therefore, unless there are new recipes, it’s difficult to make significant profits…”

Upon hearing this, Feng Zhun also found it reasonable but couldn’t help feeling a bit disappointed.

“Hemp can be grown on a large scale, and as long as the fabric made from it is durable and has novel designs, it will be popular among consumers at all levels, whether they are low-end or high-end consumers,” Huangfu Yuchen said. “Thirdly, we can make full use of the advantage of being adjacent to the Mai Kingdom. If we can sell them things that they don’t have, we will naturally earn their money. However, this point is currently difficult to grasp. The Mai Kingdom has not relaxed its restrictions on our kingdom’s trading caravans, and if we relax the restrictions on the Mai Kingdom’s trading caravans first, they may send spies to our country. Then we will end up losing more than we gain.”

Feng Zhun looked at him in astonishment and praised, “I never expected Master Fang to not only understand the ways of business but also the ways of governance.”

“Master Feng, you exaggerate.” Huangfu Yuchen looked at Yan Ge. “What are madam’s thoughts on this?”

“Let’s not discuss the third point for now. The first two points you mentioned are indeed valid options, but the process from cultivation to

maturity to sales is a rather lengthy one. If I were to stay and develop in the Xihy Pass, I wouldn't choose either of them. The returns are too slow," Yan Ge said with a playful smile as he looked at Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen sighed helplessly.

Feng Zhun asked, "Does Madam Fang have any other suggestions, then?"

Yan Ge nodded. "However, before sharing my thoughts, I would like to ask you both a question."

Huangfu Yuchen and Feng Zhun nodded in agreement.

Yan Ge continued, "The Huangfu Dynasty has a history of over six hundred years, and I'm sure the Xiguan Pass has seen its fair share of conflicts."

"Indeed," Feng Zhun replied. "If we were to count, there have been at least sixty occurrences."

Yan Ge asked, "In that case, there must have been numerous heroic sacrifices and revered heroes."

"Naturally," Feng Zhun's expression turned serious and solemn. "My Great Han Kingdom has no shortage of outstanding individuals. Without going too far back, during the reign of the former emperor, Liao Kingdom trespassed into the Mai Kingdom and violated our borders. It was an ordinary commoner, Huang Sheng, who discovered this situation. One day, while he was on the mountain, he stumbled upon a large patch of wild vegetables. Reluctant to let them go to waste, he dug them all up before returning home under the cover of darkness. It was then that he noticed suspicious torchlights on the mountain. Living on the border, the people have a strong sense of vigilance, and he remained cautious, hiding in the shadows to observe. To his surprise, it turned out to be an enemy army. Without hesitation, he swiftly severed the bridge over the river with an axe, but his actions exposed him to the enemy and he was mercilessly killed. When we discovered his body near the broken bridge, he still tightly gripped the axe in his hand. This incident is widely known among the young and old at Xiguan Pass."

“Truly an admirable hero!” Yan Ge said with solemnity.

Huangfu Yuchen asked, “Why did you bring up this matter, madam?”

Yan Ge explained, “My idea is to transform the Xiguan Pass into a famous historical and cultural city!”

Huangfu Yuchen’s heart stirred. “So, you mean to promote the heroic deeds of the Xiguan Pass? That’s a splendid idea.”

Feng Zhun’s eyes also lit up. “Madam Fang, please elaborate on your proposal.”

Yan Ge stood up, walked to the window, and pointed towards the distance. “What do you see there? Mountains. And what do mountains have? Rocks. Moreover, there are sturdy marbles and granites among them. We can use these stones to sculpt statues of numerous war heroes and erect them within the city. Firstly, it serves as a commemoration; secondly, it functions as propaganda, educating the future generations of the Great Han Kingdom, making them understand that their current peaceful and prosperous lives were hard-earned, obtained through the countless sacrifices of their predecessors. Even after many years, these stone statues will endure and retain their significance. Thirdly, the soldiers of the border will naturally take pride in these heroes. In the event of future conflicts, they will show unwavering loyalty and dedication without question. If they fall on the battlefield, they would certainly hope that their statues are worthy of admiration by the people. Fourthly, with an increase in tourists visiting the Xiguan Pass, the local economy will naturally flourish. They will indulge in its distinctive cuisine, purchase unique souvenirs—this brings me to another point, stone carving. Carve animals, figures, flowers, plants, trees…and sell them in places where such stones are scarce. Xiguan Pass is abundant in rocks, making it a lucrative trade without any initial investment.”

Feng Zhun stared at him in astonishment, completely dumbfounded. He stood up excitedly, knocking over his chair, and exclaimed incoherently, “Madam Fang! Please, you must stay a few more days at Xiguan Pass. I must report this to General Cao. He will certainly offer robust support for your idea. Please, you and Young Master Fang, wait a moment…”

Without waiting for Yan Ge’s response, he hurriedly ran off, nearly tripping down the stairs.

Yan Ge shrugged helplessly.

Huangfu Yuchen reached out and grabbed the armrest of Yan Ge’s chair, pulling him closer.

“What are you doing?” Yan Ge looked at him in confusion.

Huangfu Yuchen held him tightly around the waist. “Don’t you see how the other guests are eyeing you with greed? I must protect you.”

Yan Ge chuckled and lifted a teacup to his lips. “Drink your tea.”

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After running out, Feng Zhun realized that he didn't know where Cao Zhan was. Recently, there hadn't been any military activities in Xiguan Pass, so Cao Zhan would usually train his soldiers in the morning, take care of camp affairs, and then either patrol the streets with his soldiers to maintain order or attend to his personal matters. Worried that Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen might become impatient, Feng Zhun didn't have much time to search for Cao Zhan.

A sudden thought struck him, and he shouted to the sky, "Cao Zhan— I've made up my mind about what you told me!"

After shouting, he bent over and gasped for breath.

On the rooftop of a building diagonally across the restaurant, Cao Zhan was so startled that he almost fell down. He took a step back and landed in front of Feng Zhun.

"Changed your mind?" Cao Zhan asked.

"Nonsense!" Feng Zhun uttered a word, grabbed his wrist, and ran, saying, "Follow me!"

Cao Zhan broke free from his grip.

"What are you doing?" Feng Zhun was angry. "I'm in a hurry!"

Cao Zhan said expressionlessly, "I twisted my wrist during morning training. Just hold my hand."

"Oh," Feng Zhun grabbed his hand and continued running.

A barely noticeable smile curled up at the corner of Cao Zhan's lips.

Feng Zhun ran about ten meters before realizing something was wrong.

'Damn it, aren't hands and wrists connected? And Cao Zhan has martial arts skills, isn't he faster than me? Why am I pulling him along?'

He angrily shouted at Cao Zhan, "Run by yourself! Otherwise, you'll regret it!"

Cao Zhan's figure flickered, and he appeared at the stairs on the second floor, silently watching Feng Zhun.

Who knew why a prestigious General like him would accept a threat from a mere military strategist.

Feng Zhun was so angry that he almost couldn't catch his breath. Couldn't he run together with him!

Anyway, he finally made it to the second floor, pulling Cao Zhan to Yan Ge's side. After taking a sip of tea and calming down, he said seriously, "General Cao, this is the situation. These two are…"

After hearing Feng Zhun's explanation, Cao Zhan's expression turned solemn. He clasped his fists towards Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen and said, "Master Fang, Madam Fang, on behalf of all the soldiers and people of Xiguan Pass, I thank you."

Huangfu Yuchen didn't stand up, even in disguise as a commoner. "General Cao's words are too heavy. General Cao, let's sit down and talk."

"Please." Cao Zhan agreed.

After the four of them sat back down, Cao Zhan said, "Madam Fang's proposal is not only beneficial to Xiguan Pass but also to the Great Han Kingdom. I will write a detailed report and present it to the court."

Yan Ge cleared his throat. "Enough about that. Serving the kingdom is our duty as commoners. Let's talk about how stone carving can promote

economic development. Our Fang family's business has already grown large enough, so we won't compete with the local people for money. General Cao and Mr. Feng, you can share the method I just mentioned with the people of Xiguan Pass. Anyone with the ability can open a stone carving shop. Of course, before that, we should carve stone statues to honor the past heroes, earning the admiration of the people and future generations."

Cao Zhan and Feng Zhun exchanged a glance, both showing delight. "However, this method was proposed by Madam Fang…"

Huangfu Yuchen interrupted, "Madam Fang has always been decisive. Once he has made a decision, no one can change it. You don't have to decline, consider it our goodwill towards the soldiers and people of Xiguan Pass."

Cao Zhan agreed, "Then we will express our gratitude on behalf of the people of Xiguan Pass."

After Feng Zhun poured tea for Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, he said, "Since the Fang family has been engaged in business for generations, you must have heard of the esteemed Yan Guiren, right?"

"Yan Guiren, the boss of the First Company?" Yan Ge proudly raised an eyebrow at Huangfu Yuchen, as if to say, 'See, my reputation has reached the border.'

Huangfu Yuchen smiled slightly and squeezed his hand.

Feng Zhun said, "Exactly."

Huangfu Yuchen calmly said, "Naturally, I've heard of him. I've heard that Yan Guiren is not only handsome and charming but also always full of brilliant ideas. He not only developed and expanded the First Company but also brought about great changes and progress to the Great Han Kingdom."

"Ahem…" Yan Ge coughed, his face turning red. "It sounds like you admire him a lot."

Feng Zhun joked, “Madam Fang, are you jealous?”

Huangfu Yuchen lightly patted Yan Ge’s back. “No need to be jealous. I admire him, but I care about you.”

Yan Ge smiled with narrowed eyes.

Feng Zhun smiled and said, “The glorious achievements of Yan Guiren have already reached the border long ago. I won’t hide it from both of you. The soldiers at the border, including myself, have all dreamed that Yan Guiren would have the opportunity to visit Xiguan Pass and give us guidance. Unexpectedly, Yan Guiren couldn’t come, but we have received another fortunate star, which is you, Madam Fang. I offer you tea in place of wine, and I toast to you once again.”

Yan Ge took a sip of tea and waved his hand, saying, “It’s just a small effort, nothing worth mentioning.”

Cao Zhan said, “In the past, we had portraits of the heroes, and we can use those as references for the stone carvings. However, we still need to choose a suitable location to place the statues.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “How about placing them by the eastern city wall, facing the east? The sunrise in the east symbolizes the rising power of the Great Han, which will become stronger and stronger. What do you think?”

Yan Ge and Cao Zhan both nodded.

Cao Zhan continued, “I will send people to find suitable stones. There are several elderly people in the city who are skilled in carving, so the sooner we complete it, the better.”

Yan Ge added, “General Cao, there is one more thing to note. Although stone carving has a promising future, we should proceed steadily in the beginning and not be too hasty. If everyone opens a stone carving shop, it will be difficult to make a profit and will disrupt the market in Xiguan Pass.”

“Madam Fang’s words make sense, and I will keep that in mind,” Cao Zhan said.

Feng Zhun occasionally glanced at Yan Ge thoughtfully and suddenly said, “Yan Guiren, your birthday is coming up soon, isn’t it?”

Yan Ge casually replied, “Yes, but it’s still a few months away.”

Huangfu Yuchen was about to stop him, but it was too late.

Feng Zhun’s face changed dramatically, and he was about to kneel down. If Madam Fang is Yan Guiren, then Young Master Fang can only be the emperor!

Yan Ge quickly stopped him and signaled that there were other customers around.

Cao Zhan had not yet realized what was going on. Feng Zhun politely and respectfully said, “Young master, madam, please let’s move to another place.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, Feng Zhun had already seen through their identities, so it would be easier to speak.

Only then did Cao Zhan realize something, and his expression changing drastically — both shocked and delighted.

The group moved to a nearby restaurant and booked a private room.

Cao Zhan and Feng Zhun knelt down together and said, “We, your humble servants, pay respects to the emperor. Long live the emperor, long live! We pay our greetings to Yan Guiren!’

Huangfu Yuchen raised his hand, “Rise.”

But Cao Zhan and Feng Zhun didn’t get up.

Feng Zhun said, “Your humble servant would like to apologize to the emperor and Yan Guiren. It was just a casual question, never expecting that

both of you are indeed the emperor and Yan Guiren… I sincerely apologize to the emperor and Yan Guiren! As the saying goes, one should not speak ill of others behind their backs, and it is indeed reasonable."

"The strategist had no ill intentions, and I ask the emperor and Yan Guiren not to hold him accountable," Cao Zhan pleaded for Feng Zhun.

Yan Ge helplessly tapped his forehead and said to Huangfu Yuchen, "I believe Feng Zhun will definitely become good friends with Jiang Gan."

"I agree." Huangfu Yuchen then said to Cao Zhan and Feng Zhun, "Please rise. We are traveling in disguise this time, and it must not be revealed. As for Strategist Feng, you are also pardoned."

"Thank you, young master!" Feng Zhun cleverly changed his wording.

Cao Zhan said, "Xiguan Pass is a challenging place. I request the young master and his wife to move to the general's residence, where there are servants to take care of you, making your travels more comfortable."

Yan Ge looked at Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen said, "No need. My wife and I will not stay here for long. However, since we're here, take this young master to the military camp to have a look."

"Yes. Young master, please. Madam, please."

Feng Zhun stood on the side without saying a word, standing tall with a serious expression. He had previously been leering at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, and he couldn't help but worry that these two might seek revenge on him later.

Yan Ge understood his thoughts and intentionally didn't explain or speak to him, but instead signaled Huangfu Yuchen with his eyes.

Huangfu Yuchen responded with an indulgent smile.

At the general's residence, Cao Zhan said, "I dare to suggest that Madam and the young master change into the attire of soldiers."

"Why?" Yan Ge was puzzled.

Cao Zhan explained, "Ordinary people are never allowed to enter the military camp. I'm doing this to prevent the soldiers from seeing ordinary people entering and affecting their morale."

"I see." Yan Ge nodded. "General Cao's consideration is thoughtful."

After changing into soldier's attire, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen followed Cao Zhan and Feng Zhun to the training ground of the military camp. The soldiers were conducting exercises with a stern military discipline. With each command and rebuke, a chilling aura filled the air.

After visiting the training ground, Huangfu Yuchen had Cao Zhan take him to see the military defense map of Xiguan Pass, the soldiers' barracks, and the mess hall.

"How is the soldiers' food?" Huangfu Yuchen looked at the pile of potatoes and cabbages in the kitchen, furrowing his brow slightly.

Cao Zhan truthfully replied, "Most vegetables are not suitable for cultivation in Xiguan Pass, and transportation from outside is inconvenient and costly. Most of the time, we eat potatoes and cabbage, occasionally adding some meat. But meat is expensive here, so we don't have it frequently. We can have meat roughly two or three times a month."

Yan Ge stared at Huangfu Yuchen intently, indicating that he had something to say.

Huangfu Yuchen raised his eyebrows, rubbed his hair, and spoke in a warm tone, "If you have something to say, just say it."

Yan Ge asked Cao Zhan, "The food and vegetables used for the soldiers' meals are purchased from outside. Over the long term, the expenses must be high. Why not solve part of it on your own? For example, during the

soldiers' free time, they could cultivate some vegetables, raise chickens, sheep, and pigs, etc. On one hand, it would reduce the consumption of military rations, and on the other hand, it would be self-sustaining, allowing the soldiers to have a few more meat meals. It's not easy to be stationed at the border for a long time."

Ignoring Yan Ge's status, Cao Zhan exclaimed, "Madam! The soldiers are meant to go to the battlefield and kill enemies. It's not appropriate to grow vegetables and raise pigs."

Feng Zhun discreetly tugged at his sleeve. "Madam, General Cao means that the soldiers need to be alert at all times so that they can be invincible on the battlefield in the future."

Yan Ge lightly smiled and waved his hand dismissively. "No need to be nervous. I understand General Cao's intention. General Cao's concerns are valid, but what if we let some disabled soldiers cultivate vegetables and raise pigs? Disabled soldiers can no longer fight on the battlefield, and even after going back home, it isn't easy to find a livelihood. Allowing them to grow vegetables and raise pigs is for the improvement of other soldiers' meals and also for the service of the country. Alternatively, we can hire some local people to help with vegetable cultivation and pig feeding. In any case, it would at least occasionally improve the soldiers' meals."

Cao Zhan saluted with clasped fists. "Madam, your thinking is astute. I admire it! I was impolite just now. Please forgive me."

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at him sternly. "General Cao seems to have a somewhat impatient temperament, which may be disadvantageous on the battlefield. Please pay more attention in the future." On the surface, he was admonishing Cao Zhan, but in reality, he was avenging his wife's honor.

Yan Ge looked at him with a smile.

"Yes," Cao Zhan quickly replied.

Huangfu Yuchen paced back and forth, contemplating for a while, and said, "The soldiers stationed at the border have indeed suffered hardships, so it is

natural to improve their meals. However, the border has always been filled with battles, and it is through experiencing hardships that their character and willpower can be tempered. If they have meat to eat every day and wine to drink every month, it is inevitable that it will breed decadence and laziness. From my perspective, improving the meals once every five or six days should be sufficient. General Cao understands the situation at the border better and can adjust accordingly."

Cao Zhan and Feng Zhun knelt down in gratitude. "The young master's words are reasonable. Thank you for your understanding, young master!"

"What do you think, wife?" Huangfu Yuchen asked.

Yan Ge nodded. "You have considered it well."

Huangfu Yuchen hugged his waist. "You don't understand the matters of the military camp, but you have already come up with so many suggestions. Do you have any other ideas?"

Yan Ge shook his head.

Huangfu Yuchen said, "I do have an idea. Listen to it and see if it's appropriate."

"Please go ahead."

Cao Zhan and Feng Zhun were secretly surprised by the interaction between the two, and they were also surprised that Huangfu Yuchen allowed Yan Ge to participate in governance. However, they tactfully remained silent.

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Huangfu Yuchen said, “I just reviewed the soldiers’ register. Many of them have been stationed at the border for over three years without returning home, including General Cao. General Cao has worked hard.”

“Serving Great Han is this servant’s honor and glory!” Cao Zhan replied proudly.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded and turned to Yan Ge. “I was thinking, what if we rotate half of the stationed soldiers with the soldiers from the inland every two years? This way, it would bring the soldiers who have been away from their families closer to home, and the communication between them will be more convenient.”

Cao Zhan and Feng Zhun were both excited by the idea.

Yan Ge asked with confusion, “Why not replace all of them?”

Cao Zhan looked nervously at Huangfu Yuchen. If they were all replaced, the disadvantages would outweigh the benefits.

Huangfu Yuchen shook his head. “The border environment is harsh. If we replace all the soldiers, the new ones would need to readjust to the new environment and establish rapport with the commanders. It would be highly unfavorable if there were any conflicts during this period. By only replacing half, half new recruits and half seasoned soldiers, they can adapt more quickly. At the same time, it also allows for the training of soldiers from the inland. Over time, all of our soldiers will experience the trials at the border. What do you think?”

Yan Ge clapped his hands in approval. “Brilliant. We can also start by mixing the accommodations of new recruits and seasoned soldiers, which

will promote their faster adaptation to the new environment and foster mutual understanding and trust."

Cao Zhan and Feng Zhun exchanged glances and simultaneously praised, "Your Majesty and Yan Guiren's considerations are a blessing for the soldiers and the people."

"That's enough. No need for more words," Huangfu Yuchen said. "General Cao is more familiar with the border situation, and he might not be able to return to the capital in the coming years. However, once I return, I will approve your parents' visit to reunite with you for a month. It's not possible for all the families of the stationed generals to move to the border. Considering the possibility of the border commanders defecting, it is necessary to keep some of their family members in the capital. This has been the practice throughout history."

"Thank you, Your Majesty!" Cao Zhan glanced at Feng Zhun.

Feng Zhun awkwardly shifted his body and gave him a disdainful look, thinking, 'Why are you looking at me?'

Huangfu Yuchen said, "Madam has already given you guidance on the matter of Xiguan Pass. You can handle the specifics. The two of us will depart early tomorrow morning, and there's no need for a farewell. Once there is progress, submit a report to the capital. I will respond when I return."

"Yes."

After Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge left, Cao Zhan stared deeply at Feng Zhun with an indiscernible delight in his eyes.

Feng Zhun felt uneasy and growled, "Why are you looking at me?"

Cao Zhan raised his eyebrows. "What did you say?"

"I said, 'Why are you looking at me?' Can't I say that? Are you afraid?" Feng Zhun crossed his arms.

Cao Zhan burst into laughter. “Hahaha…”

“Something’s wrong with you,” Feng Zhun muttered disdainfully and walked away with a flick of his sleeves.

Huangfu Yuchen, Yan Ge, and Yan Jin returned to the inn, rested for a while, and began packing their belongings. This time, Yan Ge was smarter and packed their clothes separately. They also took out some important pills and food from the system backpack and divided them into three portions, placing them in their respective bags. They even spent a whole 100,000 silver taels in the system store to buy three Huiyuan Pills, just in case they encountered unexpected situations and needed a solution.

***Huiyuan pills can help one quickly recover their vitality and reduce the damage to the spirit and dantian.**

Suddenly, his hand caught something soft beneath a cloth in a bundle. Curious, he touched it and felt something fluffy that seemed to wriggle!

He stepped back a few steps and hid behind Huangfu Yuchen, vigorously rubbing his hands on him. “There’s a rat! I want to file a complaint! It’s so filthy! I don’t want those clothes anymore!”

Huangfu Yuchen was taken aback but couldn’t help but laugh. He embraced him and used tea water to wash his hands. “This room is fairly clean. How could there be a rat? Yan Jin, go take a look.”

“But, Father, I’m just a child,” Yan Jin said, sitting on a stool and happily eating roasted potatoes, swinging his little legs.

“Hmm?” Huangfu Yuchen turned to look at him.

Yan Jin obediently hopped off the stool and pulled open the cloth bundle. A shiny green creature caught his eye, and he grinned. “Papa, it’s not a rat, it’s a caterpillar.”

“Oh, it’s just a caterpillar,” Yan Ge felt relieved. After washing his hands and wiping them with three handkerchiefs, he finally felt clean.

“How did a caterpillar end up in the bundle? Could it have accidentally come from the trees yesterday?”

As Yan Ge took a couple of steps forward, the caterpillar suddenly wriggled and jumped onto his collar, its body extending and sprouting a few green leaves. Yan Ge found it familiar. “Zirui, come and see. Could this be the Zhantian Vine?”

“What?” Huangfu Yuchen quickly walked over and, seeing the caterpillar, reached out to crush it.

The caterpillar quickly escaped behind Yan Ge with a “whoosh”, and poked its “head” out from his shoulder. It extended two leaves and brought them together, as if making a bow, nodding towards Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. The rest of its leaves drooped, giving it a pitiful appearance.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen exchanged glances.

Yan Jin said, “It must have become more intelligent after consuming the Foundation Building Pill. Papa gave it the pill, so it must have recognized him and secretly followed him.”

Huangfu Yuchen frowned. They had harmed the Zhantian Vine before, and if they let it stay, it might become a future trouble.

Yan Jin understood his thoughts. “Let’s establish a blood contract. Anything with spiritual nature can be bound by a blood contract. Once it recognizes a master, it won’t be able to harm them.”

“Do you think it will agree?” Huangfu Yuchen doubted.

The Zhantian Vine seemed to understand their conversation. After hesitating for a while, its body slightly enlarged, and it extended its “head,” revealing the stump left by Yan Ge’s earlier cut.

“Zirui, come here. You are more likely to encounter danger than me,” Yan Ge said.

Huangfu Yuchen crossed his arms and looked at the Zhantian Vine, his expression cold. “I don’t like it.”

Yan Ge was speechless.

Yan Ge let Yan Jin prick his finger and drip a drop of blood into the stump. A flash of red light passed through the Zhantian Vine.

“It’s done,” Yan Jin said.

Yan Ge patted the Zhantian Vine, and it rubbed against his finger, climbing up to his head, forming a circle like a headband.

Huangfu Yuchen found it quite irritating, but considering it was just a plant, he spared it.

Early the next morning, after calmly having breakfast at the inn, the family of three led their horses and departed.

Not far away, Elder Yingzun was also preparing to leave with Fang Jie and Fang Ling.

Fang Jie asked, “Master, are you sure about saving them back then? They don’t even know that you saved them. They haven’t even said ‘thank you.’”

Elder Yingzun chuckled. “This old man didn’t save people for repayment.”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen overheard their conversation and exchanged a puzzled glance.

Yan Ge quietly recalled the situation from that day and whispered, “Zirui, I remember now. When we were fighting the Zhantian Vine, it seemed like

someone was planning to take advantage of the situation, but someone stopped them. I was too focused on dealing with the vine and didn't pay attention. That person who helped must have been elder Yingzun."

Huangfu Yuchen pondered for a moment, then landed in front of Elder Yingzun and handed him a delicate porcelain bottle containing the Huiyuan Pills.

"Thank you, senior, for helping our family that day. This pill is crucial and can save your life in a critical moment."

Without waiting for Elder Yingzun to speak, he nodded at him and flew away.

"Master, what kind of medicine is this? Is it really that amazing?" Fang Ling curiously approached.

Elder Yingzun smiled faintly, "The person who helped us must be extraordinary. Let's go."

Yan Ge generously spent another thirty-five thousand taels of silver to buy another Huiyuan Pill for Huangfu Yuchen.

"Baby, the abandoned city is nearby. Are you interested in taking a look?" Huangfu Yuchen asked while riding swiftly.

Yan Ge asked, "Abandoned city? What's so special about it?"

The wind blew through his hair, and the charming smile on Huangfu Yuchen's face made Yan Ge's heart skip a beat.

"The Abandoned City is not actually an abandoned city, but Rong County. It is located amidst the mountains, where the people are almost isolated from the world. They hardly leave the mountains throughout the year because it's extremely difficult to do so. Consequently, the people there are very impoverished. The former emperor planned to relocate the entire county, but the residents strongly resisted, to the point of almost inciting a rebellion. The former emperor had no choice but to abandon the plan."

Yan Ge expressed his understanding, “There’s a saying, ‘One finds it difficult to leave their homeland.’ However, with abundant resources in the mountains, even if they can’t interact with the outside world, they should be living decently. I can’t understand why they are so impoverished.”

Huangfu Yuchen shook his head, “After I ascended the throne, I immediately sent people to investigate the situation there. It’s extremely complicated.”

“Then let’s go and see.” The more challenging it is to transform a place, the more interested Yan Ge became in taking on the challenge.

They rode swiftly for more than sixty miles, gradually seeing no signs of human habitation. However, beneath the azure sky that resembled satin, the mountains along the road were adorned with lush greenery, and colorful flowers competed for attention, creating a visual feast that intoxicated the senses.

Huangfu Yuchen reined in his horse and pointed to a dirt road sandwiched between two mountains, connecting to the official road. “From here, it’s about forty-something miles to Rong County.”

“Forty miles isn’t far. Let’s hurry on.” Yan Ge expressed his disbelief. Unbeknownst to him, a mischievous smile played at the corner of Huangfu Yuchen’s lips.

After running around the mountain road for more than thirty circuits without reaching their destination, Yan Ge panted as he slumped over his horse. These were not towering mountains, but rather slender and tall ones, resembling pillars. They had been circling around the base of the mountains all along, and the road, having been left unused for years, was full of potholes. Even riding on horseback was uncomfortable due to the constant jolting.

“You… You said it’s only forty-something miles. My head is spinning…”

“Father cheated again.” Yan Jin descended leisurely from the sky.

Yan Ge: “…” ‘Cheated’ is not used in this context.

“I only said Rong County is about forty miles away. I didn’t say we were left with forty miles to reach.” Huangfu Yuchen suppressed his laughter, dismounted, and walked over to Yan Ge, patting his buttocks and giving them a rub. “We’re definitely going to spend the night in the mountains. Come down, I’ll make you something delicious.”

“You?” Yan Ge rested his chin on his hand, looking down on him disdainfully.

Huangfu Yuchen handed him the reins, and in a flash, he disappeared into the forest.

Not long after, he returned carrying three neatly processed wild chickens. The three chickens were tied together with a sturdy wild grass.

Yan Ge was still slumped over his horse, looking at him with a smile.

Huangfu Yuchen didn’t rush him either. He hung the three chickens on a tree branch and flew back into the forest, soon returning with a pile of firewood. He calmly took out a dagger from his pouch and made numerous small cuts on the chickens, then coated them with seasoning before igniting the fire to start grilling.

When the enticing aroma began to waft through the air, Yan Ge flew over with a swoosh and landed beside him, sitting close to him. “My Zirui is amazing. Can we eat now?”

“Just wait a bit longer.” Huangfu Yuchen threw a few dried red things like chili peppers that he bought from Xiguan Pass into the fire.

“What’s that for?”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “To give the chicken a hint of spiciness without being too hot.”

“I didn’t expect you to be skilled in this too.” Yan Ge remarked in surprise.

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “Do you remember me mentioning that I had been on the battlefield before?”

Yan Ge looked astonished, “Was it in the Xiguan Pass?”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, “This technique was learned from an old soldier back then.”

After the wild chickens were grilled, each of them took one and began tearing into it, their mouths smeared with grease.

“Delicious?” Huangfu Yuchen wiped away the oil stain at the corner of Yan Ge’s mouth with his thumb.

“Delicious.” Yan Ge nodded.

“After daybreak, I’ll catch a few more wild chickens.”

“Little Jin and I will help you.”

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When Huangfu Yuchen woke up, seven or eight wild chickens were tied to the backs of the two horses, clucking and flapping their wings, with feathers flying everywhere.

He stood by the horse, wearing an expression of speechlessness.

“Zirui, let’s go.” Yan Ge urged the black steed forward with a nudge, and it trotted briskly. He was leading Huangfu Yuchen’s horse along.

“You…” Huangfu Yuchen was left on the side of the road, helplessly smiling. He displayed his lightness skill and caught up. Since Yan Ge didn’t give him time to wash his face, he used refreshing technique to make himself feel refreshed.

After eighteen bends in the mountain road, the view suddenly opened up, and a county town appeared before them at the foot of the mountain. Judging from the total area of the houses and a population of over ten thousand, it was not a small county in this era.

“We finally arrived.”

The two horses descended along the rugged mountain path towards the foot of the mountain. On the mountain side, they saw a man in his thirties wearing an official robe helping an old man pull a cart. Yan Ge turned his head to look at Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen’s face showed no surprise. “That should be Gong Chushan, the county magistrate of Rong County. He is the only person in Rong County who has truly left the mountains. This man is a rare good official, considerate of the people and just. The former emperor once wanted to transfer him elsewhere, but he refused and was willing to stay

here as the county magistrate. He has been in office for six years, hoping to develop and strengthen Rong County. Unfortunately, he has yet to achieve it."

Yan Ge shook his head. Although he was a good official, he was inevitably a bit narrow-minded. If he traveled and saw more of the outside, perhaps he would gain something.

In the fields beside the mountain road, the peasants doing farm work saw two white-clad figures that didn't look like ordinary people appearing in the mountains. They looked at them curiously, pointing at the chickens on their horses and their clothes, whispering to each other.

After being reminded, Gong Chushan also looked over, brushed off the dirt from his hands, and walked over.

"Are the two young masters lost?"

Huangfu Yuchen sat on the horse, observing the distant fields and houses in the county.

Yan Ge dismounted. "Greetings, County Magistrate. We are not lost. We heard that the scenery around here is beautiful, so we came to visit."

Gong Chushan smiled. "Indeed, especially in spring, there are peach blossoms, willows, and fragrant wildflowers, the scenery is picturesque. Welcome to Rong County. However, I'm afraid there is no place for the two of you to stay in the county."

Yan Ge said, "Considering the size of this county, there should be an inn, right?"

Gong Chushan's expression became complicated. After a moment's hesitation, he said, "No, very few outsiders come to Rong County, so there is no inn in the county."

Yan Ge rubbed his head. Camping was not impossible, but after such a long journey, he still hoped to have a comfortable bed to lie on.

Gong Chushan's mind quickly turned. These three outsiders were either wealthy or noble. If they could stay in the county for a few more days, it might bring some income to the local people.

Thinking of this, he said, "If the two young masters don't mind, you can stay at the post station, but you will need to pay some silver."

Yan Ge let out a sigh of relief. "It's good to have a post station."

Gong Chushan continued, "Occasionally, there are official messengers who come to deliver documents, so there is a post station."

Yan Ge smiled apologetically, seeming to have underestimated Rong County.

It was only at this moment that Huangfu Yuchen dismounted and walked to the edge of the farmland. "What is being grown here?"

Gong Chushan found it strange that a noble young master would be interested in farming, but seeing his dignified appearance, he subconsciously felt that it was inappropriate not to answer. He replied, "These are sweet potatoes."

An old woman smiled and handed a handful of fruits to Yan Jin, gesturing for him to take them without saying a word.

Yan Jin glanced at Yan Ge.

Yan Ge glanced at the strawberries in her hand and said, "So they are strawberries. Please accept this gift from Grandma."

"Thank you, Grandma." Yan Jin took the strawberries, grinned, and then picked up a chicken. "This chicken is a gift for Grandma as a token of gratitude."

"Oh no, I couldn't possibly." Grandma waved her hands repeatedly. Afraid that the boy would strain himself, she quickly supported the chicken with both hands.

Yan Jin acted cute and said, “Father and Papa always taught me to be polite. Grandma gave me a gift, so I want to give Grandma a gift too. Otherwise, it would be impolite.”

Grandma looked at Gong Chushan with a troubled expression.

Yan Ge nodded to Gong Chushan, and Gong Chushan reluctantly said, “Liu Po, since the young master said so, please accept it. Don’t hurt the child’s feelings.”

Liu Po had no choice but to accept.

Huangfu Yuchen walked over, leading the horse. “Madam, let’s settle down first.”

“Okay.”

“Father, Papa, I want to stay here and play for a while.” Yan Ge was curious about farming.

Yan Jin has been following them around recently and hasn’t had much time to play, so Yan Ge nodded, “Okay, but don’t disturb the adults while they work.”

“I understand.”

Yan Ge reassured Gong Chushan, “You don’t have to worry. Little Yan is sensible and won’t cause you any trouble. I’ll come back to pick him up in an hour.”

Gong Chushan and the others looked at each other as they saw the two men actually leave the child behind. However, seeing the well-behaved and adorable child sitting on a stone by the road, eating strawberries, they all smiled and continued with their tasks, occasionally glancing back to make sure Yan Jin was safe.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen walked and chatted along the way.

“Did you find anything just now?”

Huangfu Yuchen asked, “Their crops are all ordinary varieties, so I don’t have any special ideas for now.”

Entering the county town, the two inquired about the location of the post station from passersby. A kind-hearted person named Auntie Ye led them there. When she said, “Here we are,” Yan Ge looked at the wooden door frame made of three wooden planks and the carved words “Post Station” on it, not knowing what to say for a moment. Well, since he already knew this place was called the “Abandoned City,” he shouldn’t be surprised by anything he saw.

Auntie Ye said, “Everyone takes turns cleaning up here every day, so it’s kept very clean. You two young masters can rest assured. However, because very few people come here, there is no dedicated staff to serve. If there are messengers delivering official documents, we temporarily hire someone to do the laundry and cooking.”

Yan Ge noticed an osmanthus tree planted in the courtyard, along with some wildflowers commonly seen on the mountain. Although simple, it was indeed tidy.

“Auntie, could we hire you to help us? We’ll be staying here for a few days, and we need someone to do our laundry, feed the horses, and clean the house. Also, could you find a good cook for us?”

“Yes.” Auntie Ye rubbed her hands together. “Those things are easy. But…”

Yan Ge understood and said, “We’ll provide the rice and vegetables for the cook to prepare. We’ll pay for that. As for meat dishes, we’ll prepare them ourselves. We’ll pay fifty coins per day to the cook for the extra work, and a hundred coins per day for your additional tasks. How does that sound?”

Auntie’s face lit up with joy. “Alright, alright. Let me first lock up these chickens for you, and then I’ll find someone for you.”

“Okay.”

After arranging these trivial matters, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen went out to investigate Rong County. Although the county wasn't prosperous, it still had some basic amenities. There were shops selling commonly used medicinal herbs, grocery stores selling needles, thread, oil, salt, vinegar, and other supplies, as well as a pitiful variety of snacks. The fabric shop sold rough, durable fabrics, as most people couldn't afford or didn't want to buy expensive fabrics. There was a tea shop where one could buy a bowl of tea for a single coin, enough for four servings, to quench their thirst after working in the fields. People would come in groups to buy tea and take turns paying for it. The tea leaves used were large, inexpensive leaves picked from the mountains. The food establishments such as rice houses and noodle shops didn't exist. If you were hungry, you would eat at home.

Huangfu Yuchen inquired and found out that there was a school in the county, a thatched cottage built by the villagers collectively. However, it only taught basic arithmetic to ensure that children could count money when they grew up, and it also taught some common characters. The schoolmaster didn't know much else. The county magistrate would occasionally visit the school to teach some classes.

The people led a monotonous life every day, yet they seemed happy and content. But it only made Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen feel even more uncomfortable.

"Hey, I heard you're from outside?" A young man of eighteen or nineteen years old blocked their way. He had a piece of old cloth tied around his hair, and his eyes were sharp as he curiously looked them up and down. There were two other people with him, one around sixteen or seventeen years old with a simple appearance, and the other of similar age but tall and strong.

Yan Ge nodded, "Yes."

"Do people from outside the mountains dress like you?" the young man asked again.

Yan Ge replied, "Have you never been outside? Judging by your age, it's the perfect time for you three to go out and explore."

The young man chuckled, “Go out? I would love to. But I’ve heard that everything outside requires money. How can I go out without money?”

The other two nodded.

The tall one added, “And we can’t even read.”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen fell silent for a moment.

Huangfu Yuchen thought for a moment, “We’re planning to go to the mountains this afternoon. If you’re willing to guide us, we can pay you.”

The youngest and the tall young man’s eyes lit up.

The first young man who spoke hesitated, “Go to the mountains? We shouldn’t go too deep. There are bears, monkeys, and tigers in there, many ferocious beasts.”

Yan Ge said, “We’ll just explore the outskirts.”

“How much money?” the young man asked.

Yan Ge replied, “50 coins per person.”

“Okay, you’re staying at the post station, right? After lunch, we’ll come find you. I’m Xiao Hu, he’s Xiao Shan, and he’s Niu Zi.”

Yan Ge nodded.

The two wandered around the city, met up with Yan Jin in the back mountains, and returned to the post station. The meal was already prepared. There was a pot of stewed wild chicken with mushrooms, a plate of spicy diced chicken, a plate of stir-fried vegetables, a plate of peanuts, and even a braised fish.

Auntie Ye stood beside a shy middle-aged woman in her early forties. Auntie Ye introduced her as Aunt Ma. It seemed that Aunt Ye had informed her that only three people would be eating, so the portion of the meal wasn’t large, but it smelled delicious. It seemed that the cook was indeed skilled.

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“Surprisingly, there’s even a braised fish?” All three of them loved fish.

Auntie Ma hurriedly said, “This was caught by my innkeeper from the river, so it’s free of charge.”

Huangfu Yuchen playfully glanced at Yan Ge. The innkeeper.

Yan Ge’s face flushed, and he said to Auntie Ma, “We must pay for it, otherwise, we would feel embarrassed to buy fish from Auntie Ma in the future. Auntie Ma, it would be best if you could make fish for us in every meal from now on.”

Auntie Ma quickly replied, “Alright, alright.”

“And our family has hearty appetites, so please double the portion of the meals from now on,” Yan Ge said with a smile.

“Okay, okay.”

After Auntie Ye and Auntie Ma left, Yan Ge and the other two sat down to eat. Yan Ge took out a jug of fine wine from his backpack and shared a toast with Huangfu Yuchen.

The Zhantian vine rested on Yan Ge’s head every day. At this time, it stuck out its ‘head’ (who knows if it’s its head or its rear end) to ‘look’ at the dining table, appearing a bit absent-minded. Yan Jin suspected that it had been beaten stupid by Yan Ge, but Yan Ge believed it was just not fully awake yet.

The spines on the fish’s belly were the easiest to remove, and Huangfu Yuchen picked out the meat from both sides of the fish’s belly and gave it to

Yan Ge.

Yan Jin held his chin, pouting helplessly, “It’s pitiful for the child who nobody cares about.”

“Even during meals, you can’t stop talking.” Yan Ge divided the fish meat in half and gave it to him.

Huangfu Yuchen ate the fish head and tail himself.

Yan Ge said, “Later, I’ll talk to Auntie Ma and ask her to cook a few more fish for tonight.”

While they were eating, Xiao Hu, Xiao Shan, and Niu Zi arrived. They all carried bows and arrows on their backs, water bags slung over their shoulders, and a large cloth bag tied to their waist.

“Come in and have a seat. Have you eaten?” Yan Ge said.

“We’ve eaten,” Xiao Shan said while secretly glancing at the dining table, his mouth watering.

Yan Jin asked curiously, “There are so many phesants in the mountains. You can have as much as you want. You should be tired of eating them by now.”

“Little Jin,” Yan Ge stopped him from being rude.

Xiao Shan rubbed his head sheepishly, “Usually, when we go hunting in the mountains and catch phesants or rabbits, most of them are turned into dried goods and sold for money on market days.”

“When it’s time to eat, you should eat. What’s the point of keeping so much money?” Yan Jin pouted.

Xiao Shan’s face turned red, “Saving it… for getting married.”

Xiao Hu and Niu Zi burst into laughter.

Yan Jin looked at Xiao Shan sympathetically and took out three snacks wrapped in oil paper from his pouch and handed them to him, “Here, one for each of you.”

Xiao Hu looked at his innocent face with a generous expression and couldn’t help but laugh, “What is this?”

“These are snacks brought from the capital city, beef jerky! You can’t buy them outside. I treat you to them.”

Xiao Hu said, “No need. How could we eat a child’s food?”

Yan Jin said, “Why can’t you eat? When we reach the mountain, if I can’t walk anymore, you three will take turns carrying me.”

In the eyes of Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, Xiao Hu and the others were just children like Yan Jin, so they didn’t get involved in the matters between the four. They continued to drink and eat.

Xiao Hu, Xiao Shan, and Niu Ziu exchanged glances and took the snacks offered to them. While eating, they nodded at each other. It was indeed delicious, as expected of something from the capital. The three of them made up their minds to take good care of Yan Jin once they reached the mountain. If they found any delicious fruits, they would give them all to him.

Huangfu Yuchen finished his meal first and filled their water bags with water.

After Yan Ge and Yan Jin finished eating, the group headed up the mountain together. Xiao Hu and the others noticed that even their water bags were more exquisite than theirs. They were decorated with golden threads, making them envious.

There were many wild beasts in the mountains, and a simple and practical city wall made of bricks and thorny bushes surrounded the county town. As they walked further away from the town, about a hundred meters, the trees and weeds became denser.

Xiao Hu said, “There are many small hills in the mountains, and it’s easy to get lost. You two young masters must not wander off. It’s best to follow us from behind.”

Yan Ge asked, “Are the ‘small hills’ you mentioned referring to actual small hills?”

Niu Zi said, “When you look from the highest mountain into the distance, the tall and slender peaks resemble hills, so we just call them ‘small hills’.”

“I see, it’s quite an apt description,” Yan Ge said. “Don’t worry, we won’t get lost. If there are any mushrooms or wild vegetables in the mountains, you should introduce them to us. We like to try rare things.”

“Okay,” Xiao Shan pointed with his bow to a cluster of bamboo not far away, “there are bamboo shoots over there. They taste delicious when chilled, fried, or made into soup. If you want to eat them, we can dig some for you when we go back… Oh, and there’s…”

Yan Ge held Yan Jin in his arms, and he looked around curiously, everything seemed fresh to him.

“Father, there’s a pheasant over there.”

Xiao Hu and Xiao Shan immediately stopped and quietly raised their bows and arrows, aiming at the pheasant. Unfortunately, their shots missed. Startled, the pheasant flapped its wings, trying to escape.

Huangfu Yuchen plucked a green fruit from a tree, flicked it with his middle finger, and the fruit hit the pheasant’s neck with a “pop,” knocking it unconscious.

“Amazing!” Niu Zi ran over and picked up the wild chicken.

“That was the legendary ‘martial arts,’ right?” Xiao Hu asked Huangfu Yuchen excitedly, “Can I become your disciple? I learn things very quickly!”

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at him calmly but didn’t say a word.

Yan Ge knew that Huangfu Yuchen was in a bad mood. The situation in Rong County was severe, and it wouldn't be easy to improve it, and the biggest problem was the inconvenient transportation. He tried to smooth things over, "It's impossible to take you as a disciple, as we won't stay here for long. However, I can teach you a few moves during our leisure time."

"Madam Fang, do you also have martial arts skills?"

"I want to learn too!"

"Count me in."

Yan Ge said, "No problem, we'll discuss it when we get back. For now, let's continue up the mountain."

A pheasant chased another pheasant, and they run past them.

Yan Ge said casually, "There are so many pheasants in these mountains."

"Yes," Xiao Shan said, "usually when we go hunting, we usually catch pheasants."

Huangfu Yuchen asked Niu Zi for help in carrying Yan Jin. Gradually, he and Yan Ge fell behind the group and he spoke softly to Yan Ge, "Baby, I observed this morning that although every family keeps chickens, they don't have many. If they can catch these pheasants and raise them on a large scale, it could be a good source of income. What do you think? Unfortunately, Rong County has transportation issues. Even with various development methods, it won't work if we can't solve the transportation problem."

Yan Ge smiled and hooked his arm around Huangfu Yuchen's shoulder. With his other hand, he patted his sturdy buttocks firmly. "Call me 'husband' once, and maybe I can come up with a good solution for you."

"You mean you have a way to improve transportation?" Huangfu Yuchen hugged Yan Ge's waist, clearing the branches that blocked their path. "Baby, it's not that I don't trust you, but Rong County is surrounded by

layers of mountains. The mountain roads are winding, and even if we want to build roads, it will take at least ten or eight years to succeed. Or… are you suggesting digging straight tunnels? But that would also take a long time."

Yan Ge's lips curled with a smug smile, in a posture of 'beg me.' "Call me 'husband'."

Huangfu Yuchen looked at him calmly. "Husband. Can we talk now?"

Yan Ge almost jumped up in excitement, and he continued to provoke, "One more time."

Huangfu Yuchen raised an eyebrow with a meaningful look. He kissed his earlobe, and said in a deep and magnetic voice filled with temptation, "I've decided to save it for when we're in bed tonight. What do you think, baby?"

Yan Ge's expression immediately turned serious, regaining a dignified and solemn demeanor. "Zirui, you only consider the ground and beneath the ground, why not consider the possibilities in the sky?"

"The sky?" Huangfu Yuchen pondered. "Are you suggesting using a large kite? But that would only be feasible when the wind direction is suitable, and it's difficult to accurately determine the direction. What if we fly in the wrong direction and get lost in the deep mountains?"

Yan Ge stared at him blankly. His lover was truly talented, thinking about lifting the Earth with a lever! If Zirui had been born in a different era, the Wright brothers wouldn't have had any significance!

"What?" Huangfu Yuchen lightly tapped his forehead.

"I didn't mean that," Yan Ge picked up four branches from a tree, "This is what I'm thinking, you see…"

He inserted two branches straight into the ground, and the other two branches were connected at an angle, inserting them into the ground.

“We can connect iron ropes between mountains, and hang baskets or gondolas on the ropes. When going out of the mountains, slide from this side to the other, and when returning, slide from that side to this. Not only can people pass like this, but goods can also be transported. Isn’t it time-saving and labor-saving? That’s one aspect. The second aspect is to simultaneously develop the tourism industry here. No other place has cable cars to cross the mountains. Anyone who wants to see or ride them will have to come here. For those who want to ride, we charge per ride. Moreover, once the transportation issue is resolved, the local people will surely come up with countless ideas to develop Rong County.”

Huangfu Yuchen held Yan Ge’s face and carefully examined it from all directions for a while.

Yan Ge covered his head with both hands, “You’re not thinking of dissecting my head to see what’s inside, are you?”

Huangfu Yuchen curved his lips, placing a hand on the back of his neck and planting a kiss on his left temple, then another on his right temple. They were moist, yet they immersed Yan Ge’s heart in a warm current.

“You always come up with such ingenious ideas. Baby, I really worry that one day your mind will turn too fast and you’ll become foolish. After leaving Rong County, we’ll head south through Fancheng. Fancheng is politically clear and economically developed, so we don’t need to worry about anything there. We’ll just enjoy ourselves then. Hmm?”

“Hey, hurry up and catch up!” Xiao Hu shouted from a distance.

Yan Ge picked a palm leaf larger than his face from a tree behind him, blocking the two of them and leaned in to kiss Huangfu Yuchen’s lips.

A sense of love and tenderness filled Huangfu Yuchen’s heart as he willingly deepened the kiss, their tongues tightly entwined, as if trying to draw his soul into his body.

Xiao Hu, Xiao Shan, and Niu Zi looked at each other, their faces turning red. They were all at an age where love buds were blossoming, and they

could easily guess what Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were doing.

“Baby, it’s been a long time since we’ve been intimate…” Huangfu Yuchen was stirred up by the kiss, and one of his hands had already secretly slipped into Yan Ge’s clothes.

“Let’s talk about it tonight,” Yan Ge said, leaving behind a sentence after quickly adjusting his clothes, walking away briskly.

Huangfu Yuchen effortlessly caught up with him.

Xiao Shan coughed lightly. “There are still children here. Please be mindful of the influence.”

Yan Jin remained calm and composed. “It’s alright. I’m already used to it.”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were speechless at the same time. They had been pitted by their son.

Yan Ge tapped Yan Jin’s head, while Huangfu Yuchen playfully patted his bottom.

“Let’s keep going, keep going. There’s a river ahead. Let’s see if we can catch some fish,” Xiao Hu changed the subject.

They wandered around the mountains until the sun was almost setting. Altogether, they caught over ten pheasants and rabbits, but there were actually more that they couldn’t handle, so they had to release them.

Yan Ge paid Xiao He and the others, giving each of them an extra pheasant. Xiao Hu and the others declined, but Yan Ge insisted, and they had no choice but to accept. They were delighted and exchanged glances, clearly intending to find a chance to secretly eat them without letting their families know.

Yan Jin spent almost the whole day playing in the mountains. After dinner, he fell fast asleep on the bed.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen moved the dining table to the courtyard, enjoying wine and the moonlight. The fragrance of osmanthus filled the air, whether it was the intoxicating wine, the alluring scent of flowers, or the captivating presence of each other, they unknowingly embraced each other, concealed under the shade of a tree…

In the mountain temple to the east of the county town, flickering flames illuminated the surroundings, exuding a tempting aroma of roasted meat.

Xiao Hu, Xiao Shan, and Niu Zi sat by the blazing bonfire, each holding a stick with a plump pheasant skewered on it, already golden and crispy from the fire. The three of them stared unblinkingly at the pheasants, impatiently yearning for a taste of the meat.

Xiao Shan spoke, “Master Fang and Madam Fang are truly remarkable. Not only are they skilled in martial arts, but they are also wealthy. Did you see? They even have golden threads embroidered on their shoes. I wonder if they are real gold.”

Niu Zi nodded in agreement. “Yes, they are well-dressed.”

“Xiao Hu, why aren’t you saying anything?” Xiao Shan asked curiously.

Xiao Hu spoke in a deep voice, “We can also become people like them as long as we can leave this place.”

Xiao Shan and Niu Zi felt their hearts stirred.

Sighing, Xiao Shan said, “But how is that possible? We don’t have money. Xiao Hu, your parents don’t have money. As for me, my parents only think about finding me a wife. Niu Zi’s situation is even worse. He has no parents and has to fend for himself.”

“You all should know the legend of this mountain temple, right?” Xiao Hu smiled and turned the roasted chicken over.

“Of course, we know,” Xiao Shan said. “Even a three-year-old child knows it. About six to seven hundred years ago, a fallen member of the imperial

family escaped to this place. He carried a lot of gold and silver treasures with him. Some kind-hearted people took him in, and he used part of his wealth to help build this mountain temple for the people of Rong County. Later, he died, and his body mysteriously disappeared, along with the rest of his treasures. It is said that his body is buried beneath this mountain temple."

This story gave the three of them a creepy feeling, causing them to look around suspiciously.

Xiao Hu coughed lightly. "I suspect his treasures are also buried beneath this mountain temple."

"What?!" Xiao Shan and Niu Zi exclaimed in astonishment.

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Yan Jin opened the door, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were standing under the osmanthus tree in the courtyard. They were whispering to each other, their heads close together. Yan Ge had a smile on his face, while Huangfu Yuchen's usually cold expression was also softened by a smile. Yan Jin tiptoed and approached them quietly.

Yan Ge turned around. "Need to use the restroom?"

Huangfu Yuchen also asked, "Do you have a leg cramp?"

Yan Jin looked up at the sky. "There are pink bubbles around both of you. I don't dare to get close. I'm afraid of popping the bubbles."

"What do you mean?" Huangfu Yuchen asked Yan Jin.

Yan Ge stroked his chin. "Zirui, we overlooked something. Little Jin is not really just six years old, could it be that he has reached the age of adolescence? That's why he's so jealous of us?"

Yan Jin's face turned red, and he turned around, quickly walking away as if in a race. "I don't want to deal with you guys."

"Two young masters, little master, it's time for dinner," Auntie Ma called from the kitchen.

After finishing breakfast, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen took Yan Jin to the county office. On the way, they encountered Auntie Ye, who was going to the back mountain to dig bamboo shoots. Yan Jin followed Ye Shen.

The county office In Rong County was also old but well maintained. The two yamen officials at the entrance stood straight, as the county magistrate's

demands on them hadn’t diminished despite the county’s impoverished state.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen gained another two points of appreciation for Gong Chushan.

“What brings you here?” The news of the two outstanding visitors in the county had already spread, and the two yamen officials immediately recognized them.

Yan Ge smiled. “We are here to pay our respects to the county magistrate and seek an audience.”

“Wait here.” One of the officials went inside and quickly came back. “The magistrate requests your presence. Please follow me.”

The official led the two into the hall and poured two cups of tea before leaving. Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen sat for a while until Gong Chushan, dressed in official robes, stepped into the threshold.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen stood up. “Magistrate Gong.”

If ordinary people who were not officials or lacked official status met an official, they would kneel and bow. But Gong Chushan was easygoing and didn’t mind their lack of formality. “Please be seated. Judging by your demeanor, I assume you have distinguished identities. May I ask for your names?”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “I am Fang Zhiyuan, and this is my wife, Shu Shi. We are merchants.”

“So, you are Young Master Fang and Madam Fang,” Gong Chushan asked curiously, “May I know why you have come to see me?”

Huangfu Yuchen gestured for Yan Ge to speak.

Yan Ge said, “Magistrate, it’s like this. As you know, we are merchants, and wherever we go, we involuntarily consider potential business opportunities.

Yesterday, while wandering around the county, we discovered that the poverty in Rong County is not insurmountable."

Gong Chushan didn't expect that they had come to him for this matter, and he was momentarily stunned. He said, "Thank you both for your kind intentions. Since your vision is so keen, I won't hide it from you. In recent years, I have also been searching for ways to alleviate the plight of Rong County, but I haven't found a good solution. As you have seen, Rong County is situated deep in the mountains, making transportation difficult. Even if the county has abundant resources, it's challenging to transport them out. The only opportunity for the villagers to buy essential goods is during the biannual market fair when they can bring their desired goods to the city and purchase their daily needs."

Huangfu Yuchen said, "My wife is here to relieve your worries, Magistrate."

"Oh?" Gong Chushan's face lit up with joy. "Does Madam Fang have a brilliant plan?"

Yan Ge repeated the ideas he had said to Huangfu Yuchen earlier.

Gong Chushan clapped his hands in approval. "Excellent! Excellent! However, the distance between the mountains is not short. We will need long iron cables, which may be difficult to acquire. Moreover, we will have to order them in Rong County."

Yan Ge said firmly, "We are here to help you solve this problem, as we mentioned earlier. If Magistrate Gong agrees, Zirui and I can start working anytime."

Gong Chushan's mind was filled with suspicions. What were these two people plotting? Not only did they offer advice, but now they were also willing to personally solve the problem. What were their intentions?

Huangfu Yuchen said, "Of course, we are not doing this for free. My wife and I enjoy the local game found in these mountains. Once the iron cables

are in place, you only need to send us one hundred phesants as a token of gratitude. They can be dry or fresh."

Gong Chushan felt relieved and nodded, "Since you have done us such a great favor, it's only right to send you one hundred phesants. However…"

Huangfu Yuchen's eyes darkened. They had already taken charge of everything, yet Gong Chushan still wanted more?

"Do you have any other concerns, your Excellency?" Yan Ge asked.

Gong Chushan explained, "Here's the thing. Although I am the county magistrate, you may not be aware that most people in this county share the same surname, Gong. It's like one big family. For important matters in the county, I need to consult with the three elders of the clan."

Yan Ge looked at Huangfu Yuchen in surprise. An official had to listen to the opinions of clan elders? That was unheard of.

Huangfu Yuchen conveyed through voice transmission, "The power of a family can often protect a clan. Rong County is too far from Rongcheng, and if someone wants to study in the academies there, they have to get sponsorship of the clan. When Gong Chushan was able to enter the academy, it was thanks to the support of the entire county. It's difficult for Gong Chushan to oppose them logically."

Yan Ge maintained his composure and said, "In that case, Magistrate Gong should inform them. Zirui and I will wait for your message at the post station."

"Very well," Gong Chushan stood up.

Huangfu Yuchen gave him a sharp glance. "Magistrate Gong, I believe that as a court-appointed official, there are times when you need to be firm and assertive."

Gong Chushan didn't think much about it and nodded, "I understand." He felt a bit strange. Why did this young man lecture him, yet he didn't feel

any anger in his heart?

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen returned to the post station where Auntie Ye was cleaning the rooms diligently. The common folk were truly sincere, and she left no speck of dust inside and out.

The two of them moved the table under the osmanthus tree and took out the chessboard to play.

When Yan Ge was about to lose, he secretly took a few chess pieces. Huangfu Yuchen pretended not to notice, feeling helpless.

After three games, Yan Ge lost all three.

Huangfu Yuchen sighed. Despite deliberately leaving openings for him several times, Yan Ge failed to seize the opportunity.

“Let’s play again,” Yan Ge said defiantly.

Huangfu Yuchen quietly replaced several of Yan Ge’s chess pieces. Finally, Yan Ge won a round.

As they were engrossed in their game, Gong Chushan knocked on the door and entered with a somewhat rigid expression.

Yan Ge asked curiously, “Magistrate Gong, did your discussion not go well?”

Gong Chushan sighed, “The three elders unanimously refused. I tried to persuade them for a long time, but they didn’t let go.”

“Why?” Huangfu Yuchen asked casually, placing a chess piece on the board.

Gong Chushan explained, “They believe that although it’s inconvenient to travel to and from this place, there has been no war here since ancient times. They consider peace to be a blessing, and the entire county is self-sufficient. They see no need for cable cars.”

‘Stubborn old men,’ Yan Ge thought to himself.

Huangfu Yuchen said to Gong Chushan, “Please arrange for us to meet the three elders as soon as possible. The sooner, the better.”

Gong Chushan was taken aback. The words were polite, but the tone was unquestionable. After a moment of hesitation, he said, “I will arrange it. The three elders are usually busy with their own affairs and rarely have the opportunity to sit together. They are currently in the ancestral hall, drinking tea and chatting.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded.

Gong Chushan hurriedly left and quickly returned.

“Master Fang, Madam Fang, please follow me to the ancestral hall to meet the three elders.”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen entered the ancestral hall and saw three elderly men, around seventy years old, sitting at the head, their expressions solemn and dignified, resembling a tribunal. In feudal society, living conditions were poor, and healthcare was lacking. Reaching the age of seventy was considered rare and a sign of longevity. It was no wonder these three elders commanded such respect in the county.

“Just what are you two young fellows trying to do in Rong County, building cable cars and roads?” The middle-aged man in the center stared harshly at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

Gong Chushan introduced, “This is Master Gong, and the other two are Uncle Gong and Grandpa Gong.”

“So, you are Master Gong, Uncle Gong, and Grandpa Gong. We pay our respects.” Huangfu Yuchen nodded in acknowledgement and, noticing the chairs nearby, led Yan Ge to sit down with an air of indifference.

Gong Chushan secretly admired their composure. Even as the county magistrate, he felt the pressure from the three elders, yet this young man

displayed great confidence.

Uncle Gong and Grandpa Gong exchanged glances.

Master Gong wore a displeased expression. “Where did this invincible youngster come from?”

Huangfu Yuchen seemed not to have heard and asked, “May I ask why the three of you disagree with opening the access road?”

Master Gong replied coldly, “Whether to open or not open is our private matter in Rong County. It’s not your concern as an outsider.”

“Private matter?” Yan Ge couldn’t help but speak up for his lover. “Master Gong, you are mistaken. The world belongs to everyone, and infrastructure construction is a national affair, not a private matter.”

“Even if it’s a national affair, what right do you two have to interfere?” Master Gong asked in a deep voice.

Yan Ge looked at Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen patted his hand and said, “It’s not exactly interfering. We are only making a suggestion to Master Gong. This is a public matter, and Magistrate Gong, as the head of the county, has the right to decide if he finds it reasonable. If it is a matter of the Gong family… “ He paused meaningfully before continuing, “then the three elders naturally have the decision-making authority.”

Master Gong frowned, his face darkening.

Uncle Gong’s attitude softened slightly. “Young man, we have already discussed this with Chushan. The reason we disagree with the cable car is that we are self-sufficient and have no need for external communication. There is much chaos outside, and although Rong County may suffer a little, we have had no natural disasters or human calamities. Maintaining the current situation is the best option.”

Huangfu Yuchen smiled faintly. “Is this the opinion of the three elders, or is it the opinion of all the people in the county? Do they all share the same view as you? What about the young people in the county? Don’t they have any aspirations to go out and broaden their horizons?”

Magistrate Gong and the three elders all frowned.

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Huangfu Yuchen continued, “There is no school in the county, and the illiterate people’s descendants remain illiterate. Is this what you want to see? Moreover, as far as I know, there are only a few barefoot doctors in the county who can at best treat minor ailments like headaches and fevers. Seeking medical treatment and advice is inconvenient. With nearly ten thousand people in the county, forty percent of them being children, don’t they need better doctors?”

Grandpa Gong interrupted him, “Young man, we know that you have good intentions, but our Rong County doesn’t need it. There’s nothing interesting here. It would be better for you two to leave early and visit Rong City.”

“What should we do?” Yan Ge asked Huangfu Yuchen through voice transmission.

Huangfu Yuchen replied coldly, “Seeking their opinion is merely a gesture of respect for their status as elders. Do they have the right to interfere in national affairs?”

“Should we secretly pull the rope then? I support it,” Yan Ge expressed some concern, “But these three old men are not young anymore. What if they get upset…”

Huangfu Yuchen frowned. Indeed, that would be difficult to handle.

At that moment, a young man rushed in, sweating profusely.

“It’s not good, it’s not good! Elders, my lord, there are several people on the east side of the county who have contracted a strange illness. Doctor Liu says he can’t do anything about it. He asked me to call Grandpa Gong to hurry over, fearing it might be too late!”

“What?” Grandpa Gong abruptly stood up, waving his hand, “Go there immediately and see. Chushan, send someone to escort these two young masters away.”

Huangfu Yuchen stood up, calmly saying, “Once people who have no power gain full power, they usually find it hard to let go. This point, I understand.”

Grandpa Gong’s expression changed, and he turned his head sharply, looking at Huangfu Yuchen, his voice stern, “What do you mean by that statement?”

“Isn’t it more important to save lives?” Yan Ge and Gong Chushan had already walked far away.

Grandpa Gong snorted coldly and quickly followed the young man.

Yan Ge said, “Zirui, let’s go take a look too.”

Following the crowd, they arrived at a mud house, packed inside and out with people. Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen couldn’t even get in.

Grandpa Gong lifted the eyelids of a boy named Xiao Shan and felt his pulse, “Weak pulse… body suddenly hot and cold…”

Yan Ge asked the elderly man next to him, “Uncle, what’s happening?”

The uncle replied, “This morning, Xiao Shan’s father found him lying motionless in bed and realized he was sick. Xiao Shan’s whole body turned purple and swollen, and his belly kept growing. He would sometimes say he’s cold and sometimes say he’s hot. Doctor Liu said Xiao Shan might not make it, which made his father so anxious he also became sick. Not long after, someone came to find Doctor Liu again, saying Xiao Hu and Niu Zi were also ill. So everyone had to bring Xiao Hu and Niu Zi over to be with Xiao Shan. It’s really strange…”

“Xiao Shan’s father is sick too?” Yan Ge found it strange, but before he could finish speaking, he saw Xiao Shan’s mother, who was sitting by his

bed wiping tears, suddenly slump to the ground in a daze, her face turning pale!

Yan Ge was shocked and pushed Huangfu Yuchen back, shouting loudly, “It’s contagious! Everyone, leave!”

To these common folks, Yan Ge was just an outsider, and furthermore, a young man they didn’t really know. They didn’t believe him and just looked at each other, standing still.

Huangfu Yuchen grabbed Yan Ge’s wrist and said, “Since it can be contagious, you must not get close.”

Yan Ge replied, “It’s okay, I have a solution.”

“Madam Fang, are you telling the truth?” Gong Chushan was shocked and pale.

“Don’t spread baseless rumors!” Grandpa Gong turned his head, glared at Yan Ge with displeasure, and shouted angrily, slamming his cane heavily on the ground, making a dull sound.

Yan Ge squeezed inside a few steps, his brows furrowed tightly. “Enough! Now is not the time to consider your face. If it’s not a contagious disease, why did Xiao Shan’s parents both fall ill, with symptoms exactly like Xiao Shan’s?”

“You…” Grandpa Gong was furious and staggered backward.

Everyone felt that Yan Ge’s words made sense, their faces changed drastically, and they rushed out of the house one after another. They even deliberately avoided Grandpa Gong, who was closest to Xiao Shan and had contact with him. Even Uncle Gong and Master Gong secretly mingled in the crowd and ran out.

Grandpa Gong’s face turned even uglier, his gaze coldly fixed on Yan Ge.

Only Yan Ge, Grandpa Gong, a worried Gong Chushan, and a few sick patients remained in the room.

Yan Ge said to Grandpa Gong, “I have medical skills. Please step aside and let me diagnose Xiao Shan.”

Grandpa Gong valued his face but he was afraid of death. Grumbling, he moved aside, neither leaving nor staying.

Yan Ge didn’t know how this disease was transmitted, so he temporarily used his internal energy to breathe and placed a handkerchief on Xiao Shan’s wrist before feeling his pulse.

Huangfu Yuchen also used his internal energy to follow along and asked, “What’s the situation?”

“Young man, what can you understand about powerful medical skills at your young age?” Grandpa Gong shouted, “I believe they are possessed by evil spirits. We should hurry and take them to the witch doctor.”

Gong Chushan couldn’t bear it any longer and said in a deep voice, “Grandpa Gong, please be quiet!”

Grandpa Gong’s lips trembled, he stared fiercely at Gong Chushan, but he managed to hold his tongue.

Yan Ge glanced coldly at him and said to Huangfu Yuchen, “It’s a necrotic disease. This disease usually occurs when one comes into contact with decaying corpses or skeletons over many years. Once infected, physical contact with the infected person will transmit the disease.”

“What nonsense! I’ve lived for so many years and never heard of such a disease,” Grandpa Gong exclaimed in shock. Whether it was a psychological effect or not, he felt that something was wrong inside and outside his body.

The people outside the door were even more frightened and moved further away.

Gong Chushan anxiously asked, “Can it be cured?”

Yan Ge replied, “Yes, fortunately, we discovered it in time. I’ll write a prescription, and you should send someone to the pharmacy immediately to get the medicine.”

Grandpa Gong felt a burning sensation on his face. He touched it, and realized that his usually soft cheeks were now hard. He vaguely felt that he had been Infected, and his his face alternated between red and white.

Huangfu Yuchen intentionally asked, “Grandpa Gong, should they buy a dose for you too?”

Grandpa Gong couldn’t speak because of his embarrassment, but he nodded.

Yan Ge smiled as he looked at Huangfu Yuchen. This person never wanted to see him suffer the slightest grievance.

Gong Chushan sent someone to buy the medicine and cooked a pot of it to be consumed by Xiao Shan, Xiao Shan’s parents, Niu Zi, and Xiao Hu.

Niu Zi woke up first, although his body was still very weak. This medicine needed to be taken continuously for half a month to completely cure the disease.

Gong Chushan heaved a sigh of relief and asked, “Niu Zi, where on earth did you guys go? How did you contract this strange disease? If it weren’t for Madam Fang being here, not only would you all have died, but the entire county would have been affected!”

“I…” Niu Zi stuttered, stealing glances at the still unconscious Xiao Hu on the other bed.

“At this point, what is there to hide!” Gong Chushan slammed the table, exerting the authority of the county’s leader. “Madam Fang said that this disease is contracted from decaying corpses and skeletons. We must completely destroy them. Otherwise, if someone else comes into contact, they will also get infected. If you don’t speak up, I will personally punish you!”

Niu Zi trembled under his scolding and finally said, “It’s… the three of us have always wanted to explore outside the mountains, but we didn’t have any money. Xiao Hu said that a long time ago, a member of the royal family came here, and his body was buried under the mountain temple along with the treasures of gold and silver he brought. So we…”

“So you went to dig for the treasures of gold and silver?” Gong Chushan asked.

“Mm…” Niu Zi nodded, “We dug up a body first…”

“I understand,” Uncle Gong looked at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, his expression unfriendly. “How did Niu Zi and the others suddenly want to leave the mountains? I heard that they were with the two of you yesterday afternoon. Could it be that you said something to instigate them, leading them to think of digging for the treasures of gold and silver in the mountain temple?”

“That’s right. If not for that, they wouldn’t have contracted this strange disease,” Grandpa Gong added.

Yan Ge became furious.

Huangfu Yuchen’s face also turned serious. “Indeed, they took action yesterday, influenced to some extent by the actions of my wife and me. I won’t deny this. But Uncle Gong, didn’t you hear Niu Zi say that the three of them have always wanted to explore outside the mountains? Even if we hadn’t come to Rong County, they would have made the same decision one day. It was just a matter of time. If my wife hadn’t been here, Uncle Gong, you should think about the consequences.”

Uncle Gong, Grandpa Gong, and Master Gong were left speechless.

Yan Ge smiled faintly and calmly said, “Now that things have come to this point, I understand the true reason why the three of you don’t want to develop Rong County. On one hand, it is indeed because you consider it a place of safety, preferring to stay secluded. On the other hand, it’s because only in isolation can the three of you be the masters surpassing the county

magistrate. Otherwise, why do you always address Magistrate Gong directly by name and not title? It is as if you are constantly reminding him not to forget your past favors. Am I right?”

The expressions on the faces of the three Gong elders grew increasingly grim.

Yan Ge didn’t give them a chance to speak and continued, “You haven’t considered the future generations at all. You don’t want to leave, but have you ever asked them if they want to go out and see the outside world? Can you decide their entire lives?”

A man in his thirties grinned foolishly. “Although I’m not quite sure what you’re talking about, I also want to go out. I’m still young, and with my strength, I can venture out and earn money to support my family. I need to prepare a dowry for my daughter’s marriage and find a daughter-in-law for my son in the future.”

“I also want to go out. Even if I can’t make a fortune, it would be nice to go out and see,” another middle-aged man chimed in with a smile. “I’ve never been outside the mountains in my entire life.”

“I want to go out too!” shouted a young man in his twenties.

The young people around him echoed in agreement.

The gaze of the three Gong elders swept across the faces of the young people, and they remained silent for a long time.

“Magistrate Gong, what do you say?” Huangfu Yuchen asked calmly. “My wife and I don’t have so much time to waste here.”

Gong Chushan said, “Today’s incident is a profound lesson. Young Master Fang, Madam Fang, this matter will be decided by me. I request both of you to start the work as soon as possible. I will inform the people of the entire county about this, and I believe they will be delighted upon hearing the news.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. “My wife and I will return to the post station for now. Once everything is arranged, we will have someone notify you.”

“Okay.”

The people crowded around Gong Chushan to inquire about what was happening. Upon hearing that there was a real chance to leave the mountains, they were all overjoyed.

At this moment, the three respected elders, who were usually held in high regard, stood alone, feeling desolate in their hearts.

Soon, the entire county town became lively, as if celebrating the New Year.

Huangfu Yuchen asked Yan Ge, “Where can we find such a long iron cable?”

Yan Ge extended his hand and said, “Give me two thousand taels first.” To obtain a long and thick iron cable, he had to spend money in the system store. And for that, Huangfu Yuchen had to provide the funds.

Huangfu Yuchen readily took out two one-thousand-tael silver bills from his pouch. “Is this enough?”

Yan Ge accepted the silver bills, smiled, and put them into his pouch, patting it. “Five hundred taels will be more than enough.”

The iron cable in the store wasn’t worth much.

“So, why did you ask for two thousand taels?” Huangfu Yuchen regretted being too generous.

Yan Ge counted on his fingers to explain, “The surplus is for my hard work fee, intermediary fee, sleep loss fee, oh, and the medical fee just now, as well as the water-spilling fee for wasting so much saliva.”

Huangfu Yuchen: “…”

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Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were nowhere to be seen all day, and they only appeared after it was completely dark, taking advantage of the moonlight to busy themselves on the mountain.

Yan Ge bought more than twenty iron bars from the system store, each several hundred meters long and as thick as an adult's arm. These bars were enough to connect the nearest mountain in Rong County to the one closest to the official road. Between each pair of mountains, there were two iron bars: one sloping downward and the other sloping upward, both firmly anchored into the hard rocks to ensure safety. Even if these thick iron bars suffered significant wear and tear, they could still be used for at least ten or eight years.

When morning came, if anyone asked where these iron bars came from, they would say they were obtained by hurrying to Rong City on fast horses. After all, no one had witnessed the process, so they could say whatever they pleased. This kind of project was not something an ordinary person could accomplish. Fortunately, both Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had their cultivation, allowing them to easily leap to great heights. Likewise, although Yan Jin was young, his cultivation was not weak, and he could be of great help.

After everything was done, Yan Ge hung curved iron bars on the cable and made a hook on the other end. Then, they attached a bamboo-woven basket that could carry a person. Worried about the basket's sturdiness, Yan Ge reinforced it with iron wires as thick as his finger. Near the rocks, there was a tree from which they cut a branch that could hold the basket when it was not in use.

Yan Jin held the basket and lifted his chubby legs to climb inside. “Papa, let me try first.”

Yan Ge chuckled. “Alright, you go ahead and try.”

Yan Jin sat cross-legged in the basket, gripping the handles tightly.

“Sit tight.” Yan Ge loosened his grip, and the basket swiftly slid along the iron cable, quickly disappearing into the darkness. Only Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen could hear Yan Jin’s laughter gradually fading away.

“So much fun…”

After a while, Yan Jin slid back in the basket from the opposite side.

“It’s so much fun.”

“Zirui, come with us. These baskets can accommodate two people at most. Let’s see if they’re sturdy enough.” Yan Ge pulled Huangfu Yuchen over.

Huangfu Yuchen hesitated. It felt strange for a majestic emperor to sit in a basket.

Yan Ge smiled widely and forcefully pulled him along.

Huangfu Yuchen followed him reluctantly and stepped into the basket.

The two of them entered the basket, their legs touching, and with a “swoosh,” the basket slid away.

“Woo!”

Yan Jin squatted on the ground, supporting his chin with his chubby hand, pitifully looking left and right. “I’m just a child, how can you leave me alone without worrying about wolves.”

The wind blew heavily in their ears and Yan Ge burst into laughter. “So cool! I never expected to experience a roller coaster ride in this era. Zirui, isn’t it pleasant to feel the wind on your face?”

Huangfu Yuchen turned his head to look at him, his eyes filled with doting and tenderness that made Yan Ge’s cheeks heat up. He leaned closer and looked at Huangfu Yuchen with a smile on his lips.

“Baby, have I ever told you that I love you?” Huangfu Yuchen pressed his forehead against Yan Ge’s.

Yan Ge lifted the corners of his mouth and shook his head. “No.”

Huangfu Yuchen took Yan Ge’s hand and pressed it against his heart, kissing him deeply.

Yan Ge was immersed in ecstasy, feeling as if a long time had passed, yet also as if it hadn’t been long at all. The cable car jolted, paused for a moment in mid-air, and then came to a stop.

The ride was over.

The two of them exchanged smiles and boarded another basket on a different cable, swiftly returning to their previous position.

Yan Jin loved to play and went back and forth twice before the three of them descended the mountain.

The next day, after Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen packed their belongings, they took Magistrate Gong to visit the mountain cable car. A large group of people followed behind them. Xiao Shan, Xiao Hu, and Niu Zi were among them. Their bodies were still weak, and they were supported by others as they walked.

Grandpa Gong remained absent, perhaps still resisting the cable car or feeling too shy to show up.

Upon reaching the mountain, everyone was amazed to see the cable car.

Yan Ge explained to Gong Chushan the purpose of the cable car and some precautions, as well as briefly mentioning a few methods for developing Rong County.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Magistrate Gong, we have solved the transportation issue for you. The rest is up to you.”

Gong Chushan felt that Huangfu Yuchen’s tone was not that of an ordinary businessman speaking to a county magistrate, but he still nodded solemnly and said, “Thank you once again.”

“Let’s part ways here,” Yan Ge said, carrying Yan Jin and swiftly flying onto a cable car. “Zirui, let’s race and see who can get out first. The loser will be punished!”

“Farewell,” Huangfu Yuchen bid farewell to Gong Chushan, clasped his hands, and leaped onto his horse. He wore a white robe that fluttered in the wind, and held onto the reins of Yan Ge’s horse.

“Ride—”

This scene remained in the hearts of many people in Rong County. Even after many years, when Rong County developed into a bustling city, they still remembered those three extraordinary guests.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had an exhilarating time riding the mountain cable car. After a few transfers, they reached the outskirts of the official road in less than the time it takes an incense stick to burn.

They sat under a tree, resting and scanning the mountain path, but there was no sign of Huangfu Yuchen.

“Little Jian, tell me, what should we make your father do as a punishment when he comes out?” Yan Ge asked.

Yan Jin thought for a moment. “Let’s make him run two miles! I’ve never seen my father run before. He always walks at a leisurely pace, even when there’s an urgent matter, he just uses light footwork. It would be amusing to see him run. Hehehe…”

Yan Ge laughed as well. “Alright, let’s make him run.”

“Since we still have to wait for a long time, let’s play chess,” Yan Jin suggested.

Yan Ge sighed inwardly. Little Jian, you are too critical of your father. Even if he’s slow, he doesn’t need you to play chess while waiting for him, right?

Although he had this thought, he still took out the chessboard, and the two of them leisurely played chess under the shade of the tree. Two amateur players playing chess were even more pitiful to watch than two experts. The chessboard was filled with pieces, and they couldn’t determine the winner.

“Da da da…”

The chaotic sound of hooves gradually approached, catching Yan Ge’s attention.

“It seems like a sizable cavalry. Let’s move aside,” he said.

Over a hundred soldiers tightly escorted five large carriages that came into their view. Yellow papers were pasted on the carriage compartments, bearing the word “military.” The tall banners displayed the grand character “soldier.”

Leading the way on a tall horse was General Wei Hao, a robust figure with a stern face. His sharp eyes swept the surroundings from time to time. He was following the orders of the Minister of War to transport a batch of military supplies to the southwestern border camp. These supplies were of great importance and involved the secrets of the Great Han Kingdom. There was no room for any mishaps along the way.

Seeing two people sitting by the roadside from a distance, Wei Hao raised his hand to his deputy.

The deputy shouted loudly, “Imperial military supplies, please make way. If there is anything suspicious, kill them on the spot!”

They are our people. Yan Ge and Yan Jin had no objections as they retreated even farther.

The convoy raced by, leaving behind a cloud of swirling dust.

“Bah, bah…” Yan Jin spat out the dust in his mouth. “Papa, what are they transporting?”

“I don’t know,” Yan Ge said. “Let’s ask your father later.”

The two sat down and continued playing chess. After a while, they faintly smelled the scent of blood carried by the wind. Yan Ge’s expression changed, and he stood up abruptly, activating his spiritual awareness. He faintly heard the sound of swords clashing in the distance. “Could something have happened to the soldiers we encountered earlier? Little Jin, let’s go and take a look!”

The two swiftly dashed towards the distance, and the sound of blades grew louder. A group of masked individuals in black clashed with the soldiers, and their goal was clearly the contents of the carriages. The black-clad individuals displayed martial skills, resembling those from the martial world. Although the soldiers numbered over a hundred, their combat skills couldn’t match theirs, clearly putting them at a disadvantage. Several soldiers had already fallen to the ground.

Yan Ge gestured for Yan Jin to stay in place, then spread his arms and gracefully descended like a white crane, drawing his sword and joining the battle. In just a moment, he forced back all the black-clad individuals attempting to approach the carriage.

Wei Hao, seeing him assisting his own men, breathed a sigh of relief. He intensified his sword techniques and also repelled several black-clad individuals.

“Damn it, we were so close. Where did this kid come from?” one of the black-clad individuals growled impatiently.

Ignoring the remark, Yan Ge continued to attack the black-clad individuals. “General, it would be best to capture one of them alive for interrogation. These people seem to be from the martial world, and their act of robbery does not seem simple.”

Wei Hao nodded and said, “Okay!”

Meanwhile, Huangfu Yuchen, who had been tricked by his wife and son, sprinted out of the mountain with all his might. He expected his wife to be waiting for him with delicious food and drinks at the mountain pass, but he couldn’t spot a single soul.

“Wife?”

No response. Huangfu Yuchen realized that something must have gone wrong. He released his spiritual awareness and quickly discovered the ongoing battle ahead. He continued galloping on his horse.

Upon arriving at the scene, Huangfu Yuchen saw that one side of the conflict was actually imperial soldiers. His face darkened, and he swiftly moved, using his sword to skillfully kill three black-clad men.

“Zirui, you’re here?”

“Yes,” Huangfu Yuchen replied. “Leave one of them alive.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s ruthless methods clearly intimidated the group of black-clad individuals, and realizing they had encountered formidable opponents, they turned and fled.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen chased closely behind. Yan Ge severely injured his opponents, while Huangfu Yuchen, aware of his inability to take lives, killed all his adversaries. If there was a need for questioning, they could interrogate the severely injured individuals from Yan Ge’s side.

However, Wei Hao remained cautious. Both Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen displayed such formidable skills, and if they had ill intentions, it would be like inviting a wolf into the house.

Yan Jin ran over with a skip in his step, smiled at Wei Hao, and extended his arms, as if asking to be carried.

Wei Hao, concerned that the black-clad individuals might harm Yan Jin, quickly lifted him up. He then killed two more of the attackers.

Soon, all the black-clad individuals either lay dead or wounded, unable to escape.

To avoid suspicion, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen carried Yan Jin and led their horses to a more distant location.

It was only then that Wei Hao interrogated one of the black-clad individuals. “Since all of you are citizens of the Great Han, why did you target the military supplies of the court? Do you know that robbing military supplies is considered treason?”

“General, spare our lives, we were just trying to make a living. A foreigner promised us a large sum of money, and we were tempted for a moment… General, spare us, we are patriotic too…”

Yan Ge twitched his mouth and quietly asked Huangfu Yuchen, “What were they transporting?”

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “Bicycles. The southwestern border has many mountains and forests, and there are many places where horses and carriages are unsuitable. Bicycles are perfect for such terrain.”

Yan Ge scratched his head. “Now that I think about it, it was a mistake to publicly reveal the existence of bicycles at the banquet.”

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“It’s not your fault,” Huangfu Yuchen patted his head. “It was within my expectations that other countries would take action against bicycles. I had made arrangements in advance, so rest assured.”

Wei Hao asked who among these martial artists was the leader. Fortunately, that person was still alive. He left only the leader behind and ordered his men to closely guard him while he received medical treatment. He would find time to interrogate him in detail after, and then kill the others. Finally, he instructed his subordinates to dig graves on the spot for the fallen soldiers before walking over to Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

“Thank you, young heroes, for lending a hand. May I inquire about your esteemed names?” Wei Hao asked.

Huangfu Yuchen revealed the name he had casually taken before. “I am Luo Fang, and this is my wife, Zhang Yang.”

“So, you are Young Hero Luo and Madam Luo. I am General Wei Hao, commander of the cavalry,” Wei Hao introduced himself. “Thanks to your assistance, we have averted a disaster for Great Han. I am deeply grateful. We still have important matters to attend to, so we shall depart first.”

Huangfu Yuchen noticed that Wei Hao was cautious when it came to him and Yan Ge, and he admired Wei Hao’s prudence. He nodded and said, “General Wei, please go ahead.”

Wei Hao mounted his horse, saluted the two, and led his horsemen to swiftly ride away.

“They will be safe once they reach Pengzhou,” Huangfu Yuchen said to Yan Ge. “Let’s start our journey as well.”

The three of them mounted their horses and rode for a mile before Yan Ge suddenly remembered something. He turned his head to Yan Ge and said, “Papa, we forgot to punish Father.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s ears twitched, and he urged his horse to run faster.

Yan Ge quickly chased after him and said, “Zirui, don’t run away. You lost the competition, and we have to punish you!”

“Catch up to me first, then we’ll talk!” Huangfu Yuchen laughed heartily.

When they arrived in Fancheng, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen dismounted and led their horses into the city.

As they traveled further south, the weather became warmer, and the scenery grew more vibrant and enchanting. With willows wafting in the breeze, emerald curtains swaying, clouds circling sandy riverbanks, and countless houses scattered around, Fancheng in March resembled a painted paradise. Pedestrians weaved through the streets, dressed brightly. Some youth played with birdcages to entertain, while children threw sandbags in play. Young masters waved fans and recited elegant poems, while women wore veils to seek exquisite garments. Gambling houses and wine shops were filled with bustling noise, and red and blue pavilions echoed with tender whispers. If the imperial capital was likened to a noble son, then Fancheng was a playboy exuding a distinct charm, prosperous yet extravagant.

Yan Ge, who had stayed in the imperial capital for a long time, found it refreshing. He said to Huangfu Yuchen, “As you said, when we come to Fancheng, we don’t need to worry about anything and can simply enjoy ourselves.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded with a smile, “Indeed.”

Yan Jin sat excitedly on his horse and pointed to a roadside stall not far away. “Father, Papa, I want that sugar figure.”

“Go buy it yourself,” Huangfu Yuchen lifted him off the horse.

Yan Jin grinned and reached out his hand, saying, “Father, give me money.”

“Have you already spent all your pocket money?” Huangfu Yuchen took out five copper coins from his purse and gave them to Yan Jin. “Children shouldn’t spend money recklessly.”

Yan Jin looked at the five copper coins in his hand pitifully. Now he was also cheated by his father. He was just a six-year-old child and couldn’t ask adults for too much money in front of so many people.

Huangfu Yuchen was in a very good mood. He had finally taken revenge.

Yan Ge laughed on the side.

Yan Jin, feeling dejected, went to buy the sugar figure. It cost two coins each, so he bought four and was left with two coins.

“Are you hungry?” Huangfu Yuchen asked Yan Ge. “There’s Liuxian Pavilion nearby. We can have a meal there.”

“That’s great!” Yan Ge smiled and said, “It’s been a long time since I’ve had a meal at Liuxian Pavilion. I miss it.”

Yan Jin sucked on the sugar figure as he followed behind.

Not far away, a shifty-eyed young man was staring at Yan Jin. He followed at a distance, using his skills to mimic stopping at the roadside stall to pretend to choose vegetables or rouge powder before continuing to follow.

On the second floor of a restaurant, a graceful young woman dressed as a wandering martial artist drank wine while shaking her head. “What kind of father is he? He only cares about himself and doesn’t even notice when his child is being targeted by kidnappers.”

The second-floor seats were all occupied, and almost every male guest stared at the woman. She was too beautiful, like a person in a painting. Her eyebrows were like ink, her eyes like stars, her face as smooth as cream, and her red lips as vibrant as flower petals. Every blink of her eyes, every

parting of her lips exuded a deadly charm. Even her voice was pleasant, like the sound of springwater tinkling.

Yet no man dared to approach her and flirt because she had placed her feet on the backs of two young men. The two young men had swollen faces, lying on the ground without daring to make a sound.

“Excuse me, sir. Can I ask how to get to Liuxian Pavilion?” Yan Ge stopped a passerby.

“Go straight, and when you see a fork in the road, turn right. Keep going for a while, and you’ll see the sign.”

“Thank you.”

Yan Jin spotted a colorful clay doll on a small stall that looked like a little prince. He hurried over.

The kidnapper who had been following him found an opportunity to approach quietly. He stood a few steps away and waved a silver ingot worth five taels at him.

Yan Jin tilted his head and walked over with a smile.

“Come with me,” the kidnapper whispered. He was delighted. The child was well-dressed and had good skin. He could tell that he came from a wealthy family. Moreover, the child was adorable and would surely fetch a good price.

“Give me the money first,” Yan Jin said, taking another suck on his candy figure.

The kidnapper realized that the two fathers hadn’t even noticed that the child had walked away. Seeing that no one around was paying attention, he put the money in Yan Ge’s hand. “Come with me quickly. I have a lot more money where that came from.”

“No need, I only want this one,” Yan Jin said, satisfied as he held the money and turned to leave.

The kidnapper snorted softly and reached out to cover Yan Jin’s mouth.

The woman on the second floor was about to jump down when she saw the little boy flip in the air, land on the ground, and turn. He lifted his right foot and kicked the man in a sensitive area before turning and disappearing into the crowd.

The woman couldn’t help but laugh.

“Little Jin,” Yan Ge turned around at the entrance of Liuxian Pavilion and wanted to say something to Yan Jin, but he was shocked to see him clutching something in his arms. “Where did that come from?”

“I didn’t steal it, and I didn’t snatch it,” Yan Jin said seriously.

Huangfu Yuchen said leisurely, “He’s lying. Just now, a kidnapper tried to abduct him.” Yan Ge’s safety was related to Yan Jin, so he always paid attention.

“Oh, I feel sorry for him. Let’s go, let’s have a meal,” Yan Ge said.

In order to strengthen the brand effect of Liuxian Pavilion, the Liuxian Pavilion in Fancheng was exactly the same as the one in the imperial capital. Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge sat in the lobby, feeling as if they had returned to the imperial capital.

“What would the two young masters and the little young master like to eat?” The waiter handed them two menus and asked politely.

Yan Jun reached out. “What about me? Do you think I can’t read?”

The waiter was not offended at all. He took out a menu from the stack in his hand and handed it to Yan Ge with a smile. “I underestimated the little master. Please accept my apologies.”

Yan Ge was very satisfied with his performance.

The guests at nearby tables couldn’t help but laugh.

Yan Jin glanced at the menu and skillfully placed an order. “Imperial Concubine Chicken, Crab Meat Lion’s Head, Crispy Duck, and Plum Spicy Fish.”

The waiter widened his eyes and chuckled again. He really could read. “The little master is smart and lovely. The two young masters are truly fortunate.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded with a smile. “Braised Fish and Sweet and Sour Fish, two portions each. And bring a pot of tea.”

The waiter thought to himself that these two could really eat, then turned he turned look at Yan Ge.

Yan Ge: “Add a Crystal Egg Custard and two seasonal vegetables.”

At this moment, the sound of someone playing the zither and a young man singing could be heard coming from upstairs. The cacophony made people uncomfortable.

Yan Ge frowned, and asked the waiter, “This Liuxian Pavilion seems like an elegant place. Why would they arrange for someone to play the zither?”

The waiter shook his head and sighed, apologizing, “Young Master, it wasn’t arranged by Liuxian Pavilion. The person upstairs is the son of the magistrate. Every time he comes to dine, he brings the people from the ‘Louzi’ with him. We can’t do anything about it. I hope the young masters understand.”

“A Second-generation official, huh?” Yan Ge chuckled lightly.

“Papa, what does ‘second-generation official’ mean?” Yan Jin asked.

Yan Ge explained, “It means his father is an official.”

Yan Jin blinked and said, “Then I’ll be… second-generation businessman.” He changed ‘official’ to ‘businessman.’

Yan Ge pondered for a moment and said, “Well, technically speaking, you should be a businessman of several generations. Zirui, are you the third or fourth generation?” He referred to the Fang family’s lineage.

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “Fifth generation.”

“In that case, I’m more impressive than the magistrate’s son!” Yan Jin playfully boasted.

The surrounding guests burst into laughter.

After the dishes were served, the three of them enjoyed their meal heartily.

“I still prefer the food at Liuxian Pavilion. It suits my taste better,” Yan Ge sighed.

Yan Jin communicated with him through voice transmission, “Next time you upgrade, the backpack will be able to keep the food warm and fresh.”

Yan Jin felt regretful because the upgrade would have to wait until they returned to the palace.

While they were eating, heavy footsteps could be heard coming down the stairs. The magistrate’s son, Mei Chuxi, stumbled down the stairs with a flushed face. He held a young teenager of fifteen or sixteen years old in his arms and shamelessly groped the teenager’s body without regard for the occasion.

Behind Mei Chuxi were two companions, both stumbling drunkenly. One of them held a woman in his arms, and the other held another man.

Several customers on the first floor shook their heads but didn’t dare to say much. Those who were dining with their children quickly covered their children’s eyes.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen’s table happened to be by the small corridor. When Mei Chuxi passed by, his eyes inadvertently glanced at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen’s faces. His eyes showed astonishment, and he stopped in his tracks. He rudely pushed the young teenager in his arms away.

“Where did these two beauties come from? Will you accompany me for a drink?” he said.

Yan Ge continued eating calmly, showing no reaction. Calling him and Huangfu Yuchen beauties was like calling a tiger for help—it was courting death.

Huangfu Yuchen asked calmly, “I heard you’re the son of the magistrate?”

“Indeed,” Mei Chuxi replied arrogantly. “Join me for a drink, and no matter what trouble you encounter in Fancheng, I can solve it for you.”

“You indulge in debauchery every day, and the magistrate doesn’t care?” Huangfu Yuchen asked again.

Mei Chuxi crouched down to sit, saying, “He doesn’t care.”

“In that case, this young master will take care of it for him.” Huangfu Yuchen hooked his foot around the chair leg and pulled.

Mei Chuxi fell flat on his backside, tumbling to the ground.

Everyone burst into laughter.

“Are you from out of town? Daring to oppose the magistrate’s son, I think you’re seeking death!” one of Mei Chuxi’s friends pointed at Huangfu Yuchen.

Having been humiliated in public, Mei Chuxi got up in a fit of anger and shouted, “Fight me!”

MCUS Chapter 105

So sorry guys, I missed yesterday's update for MCUS. A friend invited me to celebrate Eid with her family…ate so much I couldn't lift a finger😂. But here are a few chapters that I had already done.

Some of Mei Chuxi's followers still had some sense and quickly intervened to stop the commotion. "Hold on, Young Master Mei, don't forget about the background of Liuxian Pavilion! The first rule of Liuxian Pavilion is not to cause trouble in the restaurant."

"That's right!" a bold customer stood up and said, "This restaurant has important guests, and even if we're just customers, we won't allow you to cause trouble here!"

"Exactly," another person stepped forward, emboldened by the support, "Young Master Mei, if you want to fight, take it outside."

Yan Ge glanced at Huangfu Yuchen with a twinkle in his eye. 'Look, see how respected I am among the common people.'

Huangfu Yuchen ruffled his hair affectionately.

Upon hearing the words "important guests" and "Liuxian Pavilion," Mei Chuxi sobered up slightly. He shouted at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, "If you dare, come out and face me!"

“After we finish our meal,” Huangfu Yuchen took a sip of wine and casually replied.

“You!” Mei Chuxi stomped in anger, “Fine! If you don’t dare to come out, you’re just cowards!” He flung his sleeves and walked out with his two companions, standing at the entrance of Liuxian Pavilion with folded arms, glaring inside.

Yan Ge turned to a customer at the nearby table and asked, “Could you please inform me about the character of the magistrate and his son?”

The customer, unafraid to speak his mind, said, “Our magistrate here in Fancheng is admirable, and sympathetic towards the common people. We all respect him! But this magistrate’s son… Well, to be honest, he doesn’t seem to be the biological child of Master Mei. He indulges in drinking, gambling, and prostitution. Apart from murder, he has done every evil thing possible. He has been acting arrogantly, and even raped a girl a year ago, but the family didn’t pursue it due to give the magistrate face. They allowed Master Mei to take the girl as a concubine. Master Mei did give a lesson to his son, but unfortunately, he has a powerful father-in-law pressing down on him. This father-in-law is the head of the mighty Biao Bureau and dotes on Master Mei’s son, always protecting him. And I’ve heard that the magistrate’s wife also dotes on this only son. Master Mei has no control over his own son.”

“I heard that Master Mei was so angry that he fell ill,” another person chuckled, “I estimate that if the Biao Bureau’s head could allow Master Mei to take concubines, he would definitely have more sons and get rid of this one to protect his reputation!”

The other customers laughed.

Curiosity got the better of one person who asked Yan Ge, “Young master, do you really intend to confront Young Master Mei head-on?”

Yan Ge smiled but remained silent.

The customers saw the three of them finally finished their meal and rushed out to witness the commotion. The guests on the second floor, upon hearing the news, crowded by the windows.

“What’s happening?” someone from the adjacent window asked the guests on the second floor of Liuxian Pavilion.

“Good news! Finally, someone dares to challenge Young Master Mei!”

Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, and Yan Jin walked out of Liuxian Pavilion’s gate, pretending not to notice the presence of “Young Master Mei” with seven or eight guards.

Mei Chuxi waved his hand, “Attack!”

“Jiancheng, step back,” Yan Ge said to Yan Jin.

Yan Jin saw a beautiful woman standing beside him, grinned, and stretched out his hand, “Big Sister, can you carry me? I can’t see.”

The beautiful woman smiled and picked him up. Yan Jin playfully kissed her face, making the woman tremble with laughter.

“Zirui, I’ll take care of this,” Yan Ge enthusiastically stepped in front of Huangfu Yuchen.

As he wished, Huangfu Yuchen moved aside.

One henchman shouted and charged, swinging his stick at Yan Ge.

“Everyone saw it, ‘Young Master Mei’ struck first. This is self-defense,” Yan Ge calmly announced. He took two steps forward, gracefully dodging the man’s attack, and swiftly snatched the stick from his hand. With a gentle swing, he knocked down several people, intentionally giving “Young Master Mei” a strong hit on the back with a loud thud.

Everyone heard the emphasized words and burst into laughter.

“Ahh!” Mei Chuxi, who indulged in a life of debauchery, was already weak. He let out a miserable cry, and fell to the ground, losing all his composure. He closed his eyes and howled, “Attack! Attack them all!”

The onlookers laughed even louder. The street was livelier than during a festival.

The henchmen got up from the ground and charged at Yan Ge.

With a light smile, Yan Ge once again knocked everyone down, this time using slightly more force. Mei Chuxi managed to dodge some attacks but still took a blow to his abdomen, clutching his stomach in agony.

Yan Jin clapped with delight, “Wow! Papa is amazing!”

Mei Chuxi gritted his teeth and straightened his back, “If you have the guts, tell me where you live, so I can find you!”

Yan Ge crossed his arms and said, “We just arrived in Fancheng and haven’t found a place to stay yet. How about the ‘cowardly’ young master here introduces us to a place?”

Provocation! This is definitely provocation! The onlookers’ eyes lit up. This matter will surely have consequences.

Mei Chuxi’s face turned red with anger, his chest heaving rapidly. “Tongfu Inn! Dare you stay there?”

“Sure,” Yan Ge said with a smirk, “We’ll stay in Fancheng for a couple of days. Cowardly young master, feel free to drop by.”

The onlookers admired him with eyes that said — You really have no fear of death.

“Wife, you must be tired after all this,” Huangfu Yuchen walked up to Yan Ge’s side. “Let’s go to the inn, take a hot bath, and wash away the dust.”

“Yes, let’s go. Jiancheng, come along.” Then Yan Ge continued to provoke, “Cowardly young master, arrange someone to guide us!”

Onlookers: “…”

Mei Chuxi was already lying on the ground, unable to get up. With all his strength, he shouted, “Ji Xiang! Lead them!”

After shouting, he got up from the ground and angrily walked away in the opposite direction.

Onlooker: “Huh. He must be going to the mighty Biao Bureau.”

Yan Ge was in a great mood after bullying someone who frequently bullied others. After settling in at the inn, the three of them took a refreshing bath and headed out. As they left the inn, they saw a servant named Jixiang peeping from behind a nearby wall.

Spotting a gambling house, Yan Ge enthusiastically pulled Huangfu Yuchen inside.

The gambling customers looked at the child next to them speechlessly. Their expressions clearly conveyed that these two were seasoned gamblers. Was it really okay to bring a child to a gambling house?

Yan Ge silently protested in his heart: This is no ordinary child!

Huangfu Yuchen patted Yan Ge on the head and handed him a silver note worth one thousand taels. “It’s fine, play if you want to.” Then he warned Yan Jin with a stern look: Behave like a child.

Yan Jin continued to eat his snacks, feeling wronged.

A gambling customer asked quietly, “Kid, are they your fathers?”

Yan Ge nodded.

“Biological fathers?”

The corner of Yan Ge’s mouth twitched.

Yan Jin nodded again and said earnestly, “Biological fathers.”

The gambler remained calm and said, “Oh, then your family must be incredibly wealthy. Even when you grow up, they’ll be enough for you to lose.”

Other gamblers: “…”

Yan Ge simply ignored them, had the attendant exchange the one thousand taels silver note for chips, and approached the dice gambling table, grabbing a handful of chips and placing them on “big.”

The dealer shook the dice and shouted, “Buy big or buy small, make your choice!”

“Roll!”

The dice cup opened, revealing a five and a six.

“Big!”

Yan Ge happily placed the chips he won into the delicate bamboo basket prepared by the gambling house, then switched to playing Pai Gow…

After a cup of tea’s time, the one thousand taels of chips turned into two thousand taels.

Yan Ge estimated that he had caught the attention of the people in the gambling house. Seeing that it was going well, he decided to cash in the chips for silver and prepare to leave.

“This young master, care to have a game with me?” a voice called out.

Yan Ge turned around to find Mei Chuxi standing there with an arrogant expression. Standing beside him was a man in his forties who exuded a martial artist’s aura. The man was the one spoke earlier.

“You must be Master Biao! It’s a pleasure to meet you. Master Biao looks so young, as if he’s only in his forties. Master Biao truly knows how to take care of himself!” Yan Ge walked over, intentionally mistaking his identity, and sincerely praised him without giving him a chance to interrupt.

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled. Yan Ge's antics really made it difficult for him to handle.

The muscles at the corners of the middle-aged man's mouth twitched. "I am Xia Xu, the head of the Mighty Biao Bureau, not Master Biao."

"Oh, so you're Master Xia," Yan Ge nodded, "Since Master Xia is interested, I will gladly accompany you. Please."

Xia Xu surveyed the surroundings, then said, "How about we gamble on big and small?"

"It's up to Master Xia," Yan Ge replied indifferently.

Xia Xu had a reputation in this area. He walked to the gambling table, and the dealer willingly stepped aside. Xia Xu said, "May I ask for the name of this young master?"

Yan Ge said, "Luo Zhangyan."

Huangfu Yuchen added, "Madam Luo Zhangyan."

Yan Ge glanced at him sideways: Would it kill you not to declare ownership?

Huangfu Yuchen nodded earnestly.

Yan Ge: "…"

"So, you are Madam Luo," Xia Xu said, "Does Madam Luo bet on big or small?"

"I like 'big,' so I'll bet on big."

"Then I'll bet on 'small.' If anyone is interested, you can follow me and bet on 'small,'" Xia Xu implied, letting everyone follow his lead and bet on 'small.'

Those who knew him were aware of his profound inner strength, capable of controlling the dice. They tacitly understood and chuckled, joining him in betting on ‘small.’

Yan Ge shook his head. “What a pity.”

Xia Xu’s face slightly changed, but he didn’t say anything. He didn’t even need the dice cup; he directly held the two dice with both hands, shook them a few times, and then threw them onto the table.

The dice bounced and rolled In the air. Xia Xu extended his palm and used inner strength to manipulate the dice, with two ones on top.

“It’s so hot in this gambling house,” Yan Ge complained casually, fanning with his hand. The two dice suddenly spun in mid-air, and two sixes appeared on top.

Xia Xu was startled. He increased his inner strength, and the dice tilted slowly. Yan Ge continued to fan, causing the dice to tremble and return to two sixes before finally landing on the table.

Xia Xu slapped the table hard, and Yan Ge casually pressed his palm against it.

After the two dice trembled slightly, they came to a stop, with two sixes on top!

The crowd was in an uproar.

Yan Ge smiled and placed the chips into the delicate bamboo basket prepared by the gambling house.

Yan Jin came over, stood on tiptoes, and reached out with both small hands to help. “There’s so much. Papa, let me help you.”

Xia Xu’s face turned pale.

Mei Chuxi looked at him with an urging expression. “Master Xia!”

Xia Xu secretly shook his head and whispered, “This person has profound inner strength. We should ask the master to intervene. Let’s discuss it when we go back.”

MCUS Chapter 106

The Biao Bureau

Guo Shengwei was already in his sixties but still possessed a robust and vigorous physique, showing no signs of aging or declining strength. Since the age of fourteen, he had been traversing the martial world, and three decades ago, he established the mighty Biao Bureau, which thrived ever since. As the head of the escort bureau and the father-in-law of the Magistrate, his status in the bustling city was unparalleled.

Mei Chuxi and Xia Xu had not yet returned to Biao Bureau when news of Xia Xu's defeat at the gambling house by a young man reached Guo Shengwei's ears. His face that was as cold and unyielding as iron showed a hint of astonishment, and the atmosphere in the main hall became heavy.

"An outsider?" Guo Shengwei asked calmly.

The messenger replied, "Yes, I have never seen them before in the city."

"In your opinion, how skilled is this person?" Guo Shengwei lifted his teacup and took a sip, unhurried and composed.

The messenger hesitated in his expression. "Well…"

"Speak the truth," Guo Shengwei's tone remained gentle, but his eyes grew colder.

The messenger finally spoke frankly, "From this servant's point of view, that young man appeared quite at ease when sparring with Xia Xu."

"In other words, that person's skill far surpasses Xia Xu," Guo Shengwei said in a deep voice.

The messenger fell silent. He knew that Xia Xu was personally trained by Master Guo and was the most prideful among the three disciples. Xia Xu's defeat at the hands of a stranger was equivalent to a slap on Master Guo's face.

Guo Shengwei gestured to a servant, who rewarded the messenger with some money and sent him away.

After the messenger left, Guo Shengwei's eldest disciple, Bai Tian'an, spoke up, "How dare an outsider be so arrogant in our city! Master, I will go find him and teach him a lesson!"

The second disciple, Wu Chongwen, interjected, "Senior Brother, if you couldn't defeat our youngest junior brother, how could you defeat that person?"

Bai Tian'an was momentarily speechless and turned to Guo Shengwei. "Master, will you personally take action?"

Wu Chongwen chimed in, "Does someone unworthy of your intervention deserve your personal attention, Master? I believe we should find another way to teach him a lesson."

"Grandfather—"

Mei Chuxi's voice, filled with grievances, came from outside the door. Guo Shengwei's iron face immediately softened, replaced by a kind smile. He put down his teacup and warmly welcomed him.

"Chuxi is here."

"Grandfather!" Mei Chuxi affectionately hugged Guo Shengwei's arm. With just a simple gesture, Guo Shengwei's face lit up with joy.

"Grandfather! I've been bullied, you must seek revenge for me!"

Xia Xu nodded, "Yes, Master. They know full well that Young Master has you as his grandfather and are aware of your position and prestige in the

city. Yet, they still dared to bully Young Master in front of so many people. This is simply going too far!”

When no one was looking, Wu Chongwen pursed his lips disdainfully, his scornful gaze shifting from Mei Chuxi to Xia Xu.

These two individuals, one only capable of being coquettish and the other only skilled at flattery, he couldn’t understand whether his Master’s eyes were flawed or if his mind was for him to only favored these two.

It’s a pity that he couldn’t win over his junior sister before she got married. Otherwise, the Biao Bureau would have long been in his grasp.

The group settled in the main hall.

“I already know what happened,” Guo Shengwei said. “Chuxi, don’t worry. Grandfather will definitely help you vent your anger. However, a mere youngster is not worthy of my personal intervention. Chongwen, you have always been resourceful. Do you have any ideas?”

‘This old guy only thinks of me when he needs a solution. The rest of the time, he ignores me.’ Wu Chongwen cursed silently in his heart before he felt slightly relieved. After some thought, he spoke, “Master, two senior escorts from Biao Bureau resigned last month, and you have already approved it. We have also spread the news that Biao Bureau is offering a generous reward to hire new senior escorts. In recent days, many skilled experts who are tired of wandering the martial world have come to the bustling city, preparing to participate in the competition. Why don’t we leave this matter to them? It serves two purposes: it can teach that Zhangyang a lesson, and it can also assess the skills of these experts. Killing two birds with one stone.”

“Good!” Guo Shengwei praised. “I entrust this matter to you. Chuxi, come, Grandfather recently acquired a pot of camellias. Grandfather will take you to see them.”

“Great! If Grandfather thinks they’re good, then they must be worth seeing.”

After they left, Mei Chuxi tugged at Guo Shengwei's sleeve. "Grandfather, when we catch that person, can you let me handle him?"

Guo Shengwei frowned. "Chuxi, what good qualities does a man have?"

"Grandfather!" Mei Chuxi hugged his arm. "Qian Shi has been pregnant for three months. She will definitely give birth to a chubby and obedient great-grandchild who will be respectful and filial in the future! Grandfather, I know you love me the most."

"Alas, I can't do anything with you," Guo Shengwei helplessly shook his head.

……

Yan Ge was sleeping soundly when he was awakened by the commotion outside the inn. He opened his eyes slightly and looked out the window. It was still dark outside, with a faint light breaking through the darkness. He asked in a drowsy voice, "Zirui, what's happening outside… so noisy."

"A large group of people is passing by the inn. They should be martial arts factions," came Huangfu Yuchen's voice from a distance.

Yan Ge opened his eyes in confusion and looked to the side. The room was dim, and he couldn't see anyone near the pillow.

"Where are you? Did you fall to the ground?"

"Here," replied Huangfu Yuchen as he sat up from the other end of the bed.

"Why did you go over there?" Yan Ge was puzzled.

Huangfu Yuchen opened his shirt and showed the two dark marks on his chest. He helplessly said, "I don't know what dream you had last night, but you kept pinching me here… So, I had to move to this side to sleep."

Yan Ge rubbed his cheek, trying to recall. "Oh, I remember now. I dreamt that the peanuts in the ground were ripe, and it was going to rain heavily, so

I was in a hurry to harvest the peanuts. But there was a rope that kept tying me down and preventing me from moving, so I picked them even faster…”

Huangfu Yuchen massaged his forehead.

Yan Jin snickered and the small bed creaked.

“Children shouldn’t eavesdrop on adults’ conversations!” Yan Ge scolded him with the authority of a father.

He moved to Huangfu Yuchen’s side, planted a comforting kiss on his lips, and said, “It’s not my fault. It must be because I’ve been thinking about developing the local economy along this journey, so I dreamt of picking peanuts.”

Huangfu Yuchen sighed helplessly, pulled the blanket to cover Yan Ge, and hugged his waist. He whispered ambiguously in his ear, “Perhaps I should be grateful that you didn’t dream of picking something else.”

Yan Ge opened his mouth but remained speechless, so he simply sealed Huangfu Yuchen’s lips with his own.

Huangfu Yuchen smiled and took the initiative. The two of them entangled and caressed each other in the darkness for quite a while before finally separating.

Yan Ge waved his hand and used his true qi to push the window open. He leaned out and looked outside. The people had already gone far, and there was no one on the street. “Which martial arts faction was that?”

“Not sure,” Huangfu Yuchen said. “From the sound, there were over a hundred people. It seems they are up to something significant, we’ll go out later to inquire. It’s almost dawn. Shall we get up?”

“Let’s get up,” Yan Ge stretched lazily.

After the two of them got up, they practiced for half an hour, and then it was already bright outside.

Once the family of three finished getting ready, they went downstairs to have breakfast and asked the waiter about the morning's events.

The waiter whispered, "Please don't inquire openly, honorable guests! Those were people from the Luna Worshipping Sect. According to the folks in the martial world, they are a demonic sect. Every year at this time, their sect leader leads the disciples to Mount Fan'an to worship the moon. It is said that they pray for their faction's status to rise and for smooth operations throughout the year. As long as we don't provoke them, they won't bother ordinary people; but if we do provoke them, they won't show any mercy."

"Worship the moon? How do they worship?" Yan Ge asked curiously.

The waiter hesitated, "Young Master, it's better not to inquire about this. The Luna Worshipping Sect is very dangerous."

Huangfu Yuchen flipped his palm, and a five-tael ingot appeared on the table.

Only then did the waiter become willing to speak, but his voice remained low, indicating the genuine taboo nature of the subject. "People from the Luna Worshipping Sect believe that in the lunar calendar's third month, Fangcheng is the closest place to the moon. On the eighth day of the third month, they carry the Holy Maiden and circle around Fangcheng three times to inform the Moon Goddess that they will worship her. In the evening, the formal worship begins. It is said that their sect possesses a moon-shaped gem, which chooses a person capable of communicating with the Moon Goddess. This person is usually one of their disciples. After the worship concludes, the Holy Maiden accompanies this person in kneeling until midnight, and then she releases all the blood from this person's body, soaking the moon-shaped gem. Once the gem absorbs all the blood, it blesses the Luna Worshipping Sect for a year."

Yan Ge asked, "Why is it not worshiping the full moon but the moon on the eighth day? The moon on the eighth day is not full."

The waiter smiled, "I also heard this from someone else. The fifteenth day has the fullest moon, but by the eighth day, more than half of the time from

the fifteenth has passed, and the moon is getting closer to being full. It symbolizes something even better than the full moon."

"I see," Yan Ge still had doubts. "Can the moon-shaped gem really choose a specific person? How does it choose?"

This time, the answer came from a fellow guest, who happened to be an acquaintance—the "Deceptive Duo". Yan Ge's group were currently using the identities of the Luo family, but they still had the appearance of the Fang family, so the couple didn't recognize them.

***The Deceptive Duo are Huang Shuya and Pei Jinde, the couple they met at Thunder Valley. Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen met them with the appearance of the "Luo family".**

"It's true," Huang Shuya said. "There was once a master thief who wanted to steal this gem. He witnessed one of the worship ceremonies, and it is said that after the moonlight shone upon the gem, it emitted a strange allure. This power only affects a specific individual, who would be unconsciously drawn to the place of worship."

Yan Ge asked, "Have all the individuals who were drawn to it been members of the Luna Worshipping Sect?"

If that were the case, it could be some kind of drug at work.

The waiter said, "There was only one exception, three years ago. A girl from the eastern part of the city was drawn there."

Yan Ge asked, "Was she used for the ritual?"

“Yes,” the waiter shook his head. “It’s a pity. That girl was in her twenties and had yet to marry.”

Yan Ge asked, “Is the Holy Maiden beautiful?”

MCUS Chapter 107

“Very beautiful!” The waiter smacked his lips. “Every year, countless people come just to see her. This is my second time seeing her, and she hasn’t aged a bit. Still so beautiful!”

The other waiters nodded In agreement.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen looked at Yan Jin expressionlessly.

Yan Jin looked innocent. What’s wrong?

At that moment, there was a commotion outside.

The waiter said, “They must be on their second lap around the city.”

The guests in the inn all rushed outside.

“Papa, let’s go and take a look too.” Yan Jin pulled Yan Ge’s hand and ran outside.

Huangfu Yuchen paid for the meal and followed.

It was true that the people in the city were wary of the Luna Worshipping Sect. The procession in the distance was getting closer, and the crowd automatically made way for them. Some who had no urgent matters stood by the roadside to watch the excitement before continuing their journey.

On the sedan carried by eight people, there were light purple veils hanging on all sides. As the wind blew, the soft veils fluttered like purple smoke, revealing the face of the person inside the sedan.

The Holy Maiden was indeed beautiful, and Yan Ge's group had seen her before. She was the girl who carried Yan Jin when they had a "fight" with Mei Chuxi.

Perhaps because he had seen all kinds of beautiful women in the palace, Yan Ge didn't feel amazed when he first saw her, and even now, he felt nothing. He turned his head and saw Huangfu Yuchen with the same indifferent expression. He patted Huangfu Yuchen's shoulder, nodded, and smirked, indicating that he was satisfied with his performance.

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled. Except for Yan Ge, he didn't differentiate between men and women, beauty and ugliness. They were all the same in his eyes.

"Be careful, be careful!" Pei Jinde was pinched by Huang Shuya, causing him to grit his teeth. "I just glanced casually, ow…"

"No wonder you suddenly said you wanted to visit Fancheng. It's all because of wanting to see the Holy Maiden, right?"

Across the street, Mei Chuxi was with two servants, staring eagerly at the Holy Maiden inside the sedan.

"Ji Xiang, that woman is worthy of me!"

Ji Xiang cautiously said, "Young Master, she is from the Luna Worshipping Sect. We can't afford to provoke them."

"My grandfather is a martial arts master, and my father is a magistrate. It's her good fortune to have me!" Mei Chuxi leered. "Beautiful face, ample bosom, slim waist! Perfect!"

As the procession passed, the onlookers gradually dispersed.

"Where would you like to go today for a stroll?" Huangfu Yuchen asked Yan Ge.

"To the lake," Yan Ge thought for a moment and had an idea. There were too few entertainment activities in ancient times, he planned to develop the

entertainment industry once he boosted the economy of the capital.

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at Yan Jin. “We shouldn’t have let someone to accompany us.”

Yan Jin covered his face and pretended to cry. “Father, I know I’m unnecessary. I’ll grow up and play by myself without disturbing you and Papa.”

Huangfu Yuchen narrowed his eyes. “Last time, you said you wouldn’t do that, remember?”

Yan Jin looked up at the sky. “I… I only learned recently.” After saying that, he quickly disappeared into the crowd and ran away.

Yan Ge wasn’t worried about him. Their minds were connected, and if one had any trouble, they could inform the other in time.

“Finally, it’s just the two of us.” Huangfu Yuchen hugged Yan Ge’s waist. “We’ll go to the lake in the morning and the horse racing track in the afternoon.”

“What’s different about the horse racing track here compared to the one in the capital?” It must be different, or Huangfu Yuchen wouldn’t have brought it up.

“The city here is bustling, and the people here know how to have fun. The experience is refreshing, you’ll see once we get there.” Huangfu Yuchen intentionally piqued his curiosity and led him towards the lake.

Unexpectedly, the road to the lake passed by the entrance of the Mighty Biao Bureau. Many people were entering with laughter and conversation, and from the open gate, a raised platform could be seen in the courtyard.

Huangfu Yuchen noticed Yan Ge’s attention being drawn away and pulled him towards someone who was about to enter.

“What’s happening at the Biao Bureau?”

The person replied, “The Biao Bureau is offering a high reward for skilled escorts. Many people have come today for a martial arts competition. If they pass the test, they will become escorts for the bureau, gaining both fame and fortune. We’ve all come to watch the excitement.”

Yan Ge became interested. He wanted to witness an ancient-style recruitment event. “Shall we go in and take a look?”

“With Gui Shengwei’s personality, he won’t let the two of us off easily,” Huangfu Yuchen said. But despite his words, Huangfu Yuchen’s feet were already moving towards the grand entrance of the Mighty Biao Bureau. Neither he nor Yan Ge were ones to shy away from trouble.

From a corner, Xia Xu watched as Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen entered the bureau. He whispered to Guo Shengwei, “Master, it’s them. The one on the left is Luo Fang, and the one on the right is Luo Zhangyang.”

Guo Shengwei smiled faintly. “Since esteemed guests have arrived, treat them well.”

“Yes!”

Bai Tain’ao ascended the platform and proclaimed, “The Mighty Biao Bureau is hiring two escorts at a high price. We thank all the heroes present for participating in the competition to become escorts. Our reputation extends not only throughout the bustling city but also across the entire martial arts world. However, joining our bureau is not that easy. All participating heroes can freely choose three opponents from the crowd, and as long as they defeat two of them, they will pass. Some may think that luck plays a role in this. But as you all know, escorting requires not only strength but occasionally luck as well. Alright, enough talking. The competition starts now!”

Before his words had even finished, a graceful figure jumped onto the platform.

“I am Zhong Xie.”

Xia Xu was taken aback. “Xiao Tianxie Zhong Tie? From what I know, Xiao Tianxie doesn’t like being restrained. Are you really interested in becoming an escort?”

Zhong Xie curled his lips wickedly. “Being an escort is not bad at all. The monthly pay is generous, and you can travel around. Why not?”

Wu Chongwen cursed silently at Zhong Xie for causing trouble and disrupting his plans. But it didn’t matter as long as Luo Zhangyang and Luo Fang didn’t leave. He still had a chance.

Bai Tian’an and Xia Xu frowned. Did Zhong Xie see escorting as a child’s play? However, once he joined the Biao Bureau, their master would surely find a way to control him. There was no need to worry too much about it.

“Very well,” Bai Tian’an said, “Which three do you want to challenge?”

While people in the martial world may have heard of each other’s reputations, they might not have met or fought against each other. Zhong Xie scanned the audience and saw Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. He inexplicably felt a sense of familiarity and instinctively avoided them. He pointed his sword three times, “Those three.”

*Zhong Xie is the young man who asked to fight Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge at Thunder Valley in exchange for information if defeated.

Since the chosen three had come to participate in the competition, they were not afraid of being challenged and agreed.

Zhong Xie’s martial arts were decent. After dueling with the three individuals, he defeated two of them, and the other match ended in a draw within the time of an incense stick burning.

Wu Chongwen secretly signaled someone.

The person nodded and leaped onto the platform, pointing at Yan Ge. “My first opponent is you.”

Yan Ge explained, “I think you’re mistaken. I am not here to participate in the competition.”

The person said, “Then why are you standing with the participants? Or are you scared? It’s alright, if you’re afraid, I’ll pick another opponent.”

Yan Ge raised an eyebrow and jumped ontYoung platform.

“Well then, please enlighten me.”

The young swordsman standing next to Huangfu Yuchen shook his head. “Lu Zhengshí? I didn’t expect him to participate in the competition. It seems our chances are slim.”

“Lu Zhengshí?” A young swordsman standing beside Huangfu Yuchen shook his head. “I didn’t expect him to participate in the competition. It seems our chances are slim.”

Huangfu Yuchen asked, “Does this person have a notable background?”

The young swordsman replied, “Lu Zhengshí, known as ‘Six Master Zheng’ in the martial world, is the direct disciple of Master Xiaoyao. He comes from a prestigious and righteous sect but possesses a ruthless demeanor. Rumor has it that he used brutal methods to defeat his martial uncle In a sparring match, resulting in his uncle’s death. As a consequence, he was expelled from his sect. With such ferocity, many in the martial world are no match for him. That brother there is in danger.”

On the stage, a stern voice spoke, “I am Zhangyang.”

“I haven’t heard of you,” Lu Zhengshi responded disdainfully.

Yan Ge smiled faintly. “I assume you didn’t call me up here to engage in idle chatter.”

Lu Zhengshí also chuckled. “Be careful then.”

“Please,” Yan Ge said calmly.

Lu Zhengshí initiated the attack, but Yan Ge effortlessly countered it.

As Guo Shengwei observed, his brow furrowed tighter.

A beautiful woman appeared beside him without a sound. “If you wish to teach him a lesson, I can help.”

Guo Shengwei remained composed, but his heart was in shock. He hadn’t noticed this person approaching him at all!

“Who are you?” he asked.

The woman smiled enchantingly. “I am Si Qianqian.”

Si Qianqian? Guo Shengwei couldn’t find any information about her in his memory, and he grew even more cautious. However, since this person had no grudge against him and instead held animosity towards Zhangyang, it was a good thing for him.

He calmly said, “Regardless of who wishes to participate in the competition, they may take the stage.”

Si Qianqian’s red lips curled slightly, and she nodded before returning to the spectator stand.

A plain-looking man who was dressed inconspicuously came beside her and whispered, “Vice Leader, there’s no need for you to personally intervene.”

Si Qianqian’s face darkened, “When the Leader spread the news about the Zhantian Vine in the Thunder Valley, it was merely a ploy to lure those two to the valley, making it easier for us to capture them. Who could have imagined that Thunder Valley would indeed possess the Zhantian Vine, and that those two actually obtained it! The Master is furious about it. If I don’t take action personally, can we rely on you bunch of wastes?”

“Your subordinate deserves death!”

“Hmph.”

Lei Ting couldn’t help but say, “But I really don’t understand, if the Master is so… wary of that person, why not simply kill him instead of capturing him alive?”

This person clearly had the trust of Si Qianqian. She glared at him but still answered, “If you’re tired of being alive, you can go ask the Master yourself.”

Lei Ting kept his mouth shut.

“Just make sure to keep a close eye on the other one.”

“Yes.”

To avoid suspicion, Yan Ge deliberately dragged on the fight for over a hundred moves before defeating Lu Zhengshi. He was about to step down when a fragrant breeze swept by, and a smiling woman appeared before him.

This woman was as beautiful as a celestial being, not inferior to the Holy Maiden at all. The crowd below immediately stirred, with almost every man unable to help but cast their gaze upon her.

Yan Ge glanced indifferently and continued walking toward the steps.

“You’re leaving as soon as you see me. Could it be that you look down on women?” Si Qianqian raised her voice.

Yan Ge shook his head. Did Guo Shengwei intend to make everyone who wanted to be an escort to fight him?

“Not at all. I admit defeat, you win.”

“You still look down on women! Take this!” Si Qianqian’s right hand clenched and swung towards Yan Ge’s neck.

The silent system suddenly spoke up: “Ding. Side mission – eliminate this woman. Mission time: six months. Rewards for mission success: 10,000 taels of silver and two silver chests. Mission failure penalty: deduction of

10,000 taels of silver. Accept the mission by selecting ‘Yes,’ decline the mission by selecting ‘No.’”

Yan Ge accepted the mission without hesitation. However, he was puzzled by the generous reward this time.

A peculiar medicinal scent accompanied the woman’s attack. Although faint, it didn’t escape his nose. The smell contained the fragrance of two commonly used medicinal ingredients: water sandalwood and red hawthorn, often used in the preparation of aphrodisiacs. Yan Ge speculated that the poison must be on this woman’s nails. Water sandalwood and red hawthorn were poisonous, and even a slight scratch on the skin would cause immediate loss of consciousness upon contact with the poison. However, he was suspicious of this woman’s identity. Why would she use poison against him? Even if it was arranged by Guo Shengwei, it seemed unlikely that they would poison him.

While engaging with the woman, Yan Ge secretly observed the area below.

Suddenly, he noticed four inconspicuous individuals casting occasional glances in the direction of Huangfu Yuchen. Their positions seemed to subtly surround him. A thought crossed his mind, and he transmitted a message to Huangfu Yuchen, “Zirui, do you remember the black-clothed people who mentioned that the Vice Leader of the Centipede Organization is a woman back in Thunder Valley? I suspect this woman is her.”

Huangfu Yuchen could tell that the woman’s every move and technique were highly skilled and ruthless. He also had suspicions and replied, “Capture her alive and interrogate her intensively.”

Yan Ge replied, “She applied poison to her nails. I was thinking, why not pretend to be affected, let her take me away, and you follow from a distance. We can trace them back to their lair—”

“No!” Huangfu Yuchen immediately objected, fearing that Yan Ge would act on his own. “The Centipede Organization may not have the intention to kill you but that’s just our speculation. What if they’ve changed their minds and want to assassinate you now?”

“I know what poison this is, and I’m confident—”

“No!” Huangfu Yuchen anxiously interrupted him, “Baby, don’t make me worry. We can capture her and interrogate her just the same.”

Seeing his panicked expression, Yan Ge gave up on his plan. “Fine, I’ll listen to you.”

“Good boy.”

Yan Ge’s figure flickered and appeared behind the woman, his right hand gripping her right shoulder.

Si Qianqian was surprised. She had heard her subordinates talk about how extraordinary Yan Ge’s martial arts skills were, and today’s fight proved that his reputation was well deserved. It seemed that their plan would fail once again. She took Yan Ge’s palm head-on, while at the same time throwing a handful of powder backward.

“Ah-choo! Ah-choo!” Yan Ge sneezed, momentarily loosening his grip on Si Qianqian’s shoulder. Damn it, why was it pepper!

“Retreat!” Si Qianqian smirked triumphantly. The Master had mentioned that this man had exceptional medical skills, and ordinary drugs might be useless against him. However, even an immortal would find it difficult to resist pepper.

However, her triumph was premature.

Huangfu Yuchen leaped into the air like a black hawk soaring through the sky. His left arm embraced Yan Ge’s waist, while his right hand held onto Si Qianqian’s back, lifting her up without any mercy. They swiftly dashed towards the distance.

Si Qianqian’s miserable screams faded away.

The others were left utterly bewildered, looking at each other in confusion.

What’s going on?

This volume is left with 12 chapters, which will be finished on Monday and we'll go on to the third volume: Road To A Powerful Country

MCUS Chapter 108

“Achoo- Achoo…”

Huangfu Yuchen led Yan Ge and Si Qianqin to a river in the countryside. He pressed Si Qianqin’s acupressure points, picked up Yan Ge, and jumped to the water’s edge to help him wash his face.

“Are you feeling better, baby?”

“Achoo!” Yan Ge rubbed his nose once more before feeling relieved. “Zirui, the leader of the Centipede Organization must know that I am skilled in healing. Otherwise, that woman wouldn’t have resorted to using pepper against me.”

“Don’t worry,” Huangfu Yuchen’s eyes flashed coldly as he handed Yan Ge a dry handkerchief to wipe his face. “This time, I will definitely get to the bottom of the Centipede Organization.”

The two approached Si Qianqin, who was standing in front of them.

Si Qianqian was completely immobilized, unable to even open her mouth. She tried to communicate with Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen through her eyes, indicating that she had something to say.

Huangfu Yuchen released her acupoints.

“I was just joking with the two masters. You two wouldn’t take it so seriously, would you?”

“You don’t need to deny that you are the vice leader of the Centipede Organization,” Yan Ge walked over with a slight smile.

Si Qianqian’s expression changed suddenly

Huangfu Yuchen sealed her acupoints again
He then raised his hand, and a long scratch appeared on her smooth face.

Si Qianqian felt the warm liquid slide down from her cheeks, and stared at Huangfu Yuchen in horror and hatred.

Huangfu Yuchen said softly: “You are very beautiful, but if you are unwilling to answer my questions, you will only be an ugly monster starting today. Even the scar removal medicine from the First Company’s Pharmacy in the capital won’t be able to heal the wound on your face. Who is the leader of the Centipede Organization? If you’re willing to answer, just blink your eyes. Remember, I won’t give you a second chance. If what you say is of no value, the next step will be to strip you of your martial arts skills. It must be a unique experience to be the vice leader of the Centipede Organization and suddenly lose both your beauty and martial arts skills, and your status will be reduced to nothing. So, what do you think? Are you ready to answer?”

Si Qianqin glanced at him and coldly averted her gaze.

Yan Ge looked at her with admiration and amazement. Is there really a woman who isn’t afraid of disfigurement?

Huangfu Yuchen frowned. Was this loyalty coerced or heartfelt loyalty?

“What should we do?” Yan Ge was at a loss as well.

Huangfu Yuchen led him to a distance and said, “Since she’s unwilling to talk, killing her would be pointless and we can’t deprive her of her martial arts skills either. This way, she’ll still hold value to the head of the Centipede Organization. If we purposely give her a chance to escape or simply release her, she will surely contact the people from the Centipede Organization, maybe even return directly to them. If we send someone to secretly follow her, we might even be able to locate the organization. However, we don’t have enough manpower for that. To expose their weaknesses further, we need to make them believe that they still have

control over our whereabouts. Neither of us is the right person to tail her, and Yan Jin can't be too far away from you…"

Yan Ge's head was tickled by something moving, and he scratched it with his hand. Suddenly, a vine emerged from the grass, stood upright, and swayed in front of Yan Ge.

Sensing its thoughts, Yan Ge asked with uncertainty, "What do you mean? You can follow her?"

The vine nodded it's head.

Yan Ge looked at Huangfu Yuchen in disbelief. "Zirui, I'm not sure if I'm hallucinating."

Huangfu Yuchen rubbed his forehead. The Zhantian Vine was not normal plant. "Baby, what do you think? Can we trust the Zhantian Vine?"

"I don't know," Yan Ge was unsure as well.

The Zhantian Vine flew into his palm and gently twisted around a few times.

Yan Ge translated with difficulty: "It seems to indicate that it can burrow underground at any time, making it impossible for others to discover it. Furthermore, it can communicate with me through a mental connection, allowing us to deduce the location of the Centipede Organization's stronghold based on its whereabouts."

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. "That makes sense. Baby, I think we should give it a try. If this woman is truly the vice master, she is a big fish. If we miss this opportunity, there might not be another one."

After thinking for a moment, Yan Ge agreed.

The Zhantian Vine nodded its head and burrowed into the ground, disappearing without a trace.

Huangfu Yuchen released Si Qianqin's acupoints.

“Go.”

Si Qianqin looked at him skeptically, then glanced at Yan Ge. It wasn’t difficult to guess that they intended to secretly tail her, but she remained silent and swiftly used her lightness skill to fly far away.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen exchanged a glance before turning back towards the city.

“Without achieving revenge, we are left with no gain. We will definitely think of other ways,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

Yan Ge played with a willow branch. “Why don’t we challenge Guo Shengwei directly? I don’t want them to interfere with our evening’s entertainment.”

Huangfu Yuchen asked, “Entertainment? The Moon Worship Ceremony?”

Yan Ge nodded. “I’m curious about how they select the sacrificial person for that gem.”

“Alright, let’s go challenge Guo Shengwei,” Huangfu Yuchen said. “Someone like him, who only knows how to dote on his descendants may benefit from a heavy blow.”

Because Mei Chuxi was engrossed in watching the holy maiden, he arrived at the Biao Bureau with his servant only after the members of the Luns Worshipping Sect had finished three laps around the city. To his dismay, he learned that Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen not only defeated their arranged experts but had also left. Mei Chuxi grew furious, but then he saw the two individuals returning leisurely.

“Grandpa, it’s them!”

Guo Shengwei walked over with an arrogant expression, ready to speak.

Yan Ge smiled and said, “This must be the esteemed Guo Shengwei, the head of the mighty Biao Bureau.”

“Indeed,” Guo Shengwei replied, “May I ask for the names of the two young masters?”

Yan Ge said, “I am Zhang Yang, and this is my husband, Luo Fang.” It was safer to use false names when dealing with matters related to the martial world.

“To tell you the truth, Master Guo, we originally came to this place for sightseeing. However, both of us are fascinated by martial arts, and we were fortunate to hear about Master Guo’s exceptional skills. Since we have this opportunity, we sincerely hope that Master Guo can give some guidance to us juniors. We just don’t know if Master Guo is willing to give the younger generation a chance.”

The crowd was in uproar. Guo Shengwei had a renowned reputation, and in the past decade, few had the qualifications to make him take action personally. But there was a hidden coercion in Yan Ge’s words. If Guo Shengwei refused, it would appear that he was unwilling to give the younger generation a chance, and that wouldn’t sound good if it spread.

Guo Shengwei seethed with anger, but he couldn’t let it show on his face. If someone caught on to his true emotions, it would undoubtedly be said that he lacked tolerance for the younger generation of the martial world.

Many people discreetly left to inform others. Soon, word spread, and people started arriving one after another. The atmosphere in the Biao Bureau became lively and bustling.

Wu Chongwen’s eyes flickered, and he stepped forward two steps. “You two nameless pawns dare to challenge my master? I am Wu Chongwen, here to learn from you.”

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at him and calmly said, “I’ve heard that Master Xia is the best among the three brothers. Perhaps Master Xia wouldn’t mind exchanging some moves with my wife?”

Wu Chongwen’s nose twitched in anger.

Xia Xu’s face turned gloomy.

Mei Chuxi was filled with so much rage that he gritted his teeth. “You dare to be so insolent! Just who do you think you are? My grandfather is known in the martial world as the ‘Iron Fist Champion’, only a handful of people are qualified to fight him! Who are you?”

Guo Shengwei wanted to intervene but it was too late.

With just one sentence, Mei Chuxi had offended the majority of the people present. At first glance, many had gloomy faces. Even if the martial skills of the young martial artists present didn’t rank in the top ten in the martial world, there were still some elders in their families and sects who were on equal footing with Guo Shengwei in the martial world. Were they all inferior to Guo Shengwei?

Yan Ge smiled apologetically and clasped his fists to Guo Shengwei. “So that’s the case. We, as newcomers to the martial world, are ignorant of the ways of the world. Please forgive us, Senior Guo. Let’s forget about what was said just now.”

After speaking, he and Huangfu Yuchen turned to leave.

“Hold on,” Guo Shengwei said with a deep voice.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen turned around, slightly bowing with flawless etiquette.

Guo Shengwei said, “Since the two young masters have challenged this old man, I shall oblige. However, there are many outstanding young martial artists in the martial world. If I were to accept every challenge, I would be too occupied, wouldn’t I? Hehe, do the two young masters think my words make sense?”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, “Then how should we proceed according to Master Guo?”

Guo Shengwei smiled and said, “How about we have a friendly wager that won’t cause any harm?”

Zhong Xie nodded with a wicked smile, “Hehe, it’s getting more interesting. This trip has been worthwhile.”

Yan Ge said, “Please explain, Master Guo.”

Guo Shengwei said, “If this old man wins, Madam Luo will serve as an escort at the Mighty Biao Bureau for a month. How does Madam Luo feel about it?”

Yan Ge nodded, “That’s acceptable. If, by some chance, this junior disciple wins…”

Guo Shengwei raised his right hand, making a gesture of “please,” and said, “Please proceed.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “If my wife happens to win, I hope that Young Master Mei will publicly apologize to us in front of everyone for his previous disrespectful words. This request is not excessive.” He had no intention of embarrassing Guo Shengwei; just losing to Yan Ge would be hard enough for him.

Some unknowing individuals suddenly realized why this couple was challenging Guo Shengwei. It turned out that Mei Chuxi had offended them earlier.

Mei Chuxi tugged at Guo Shengwei’s sleeve, disapprovingly saying, “Grandpa!”

Guo Shengwei patted his hand and said, “Very well, it’s settled. Please proceed.”

“Master Guo, please go first,” Yan Ge raised his hand.

Both of them stepped onto the platform and bowed to each other.

Guo Shengwei proclaimed loudly, “Madam Luo is a junior, so I shall only use three moves.”

Yan Ge said, “That won’t be necessary. Master Guo, since we have a wager, it’s better to follow the rules for fairness.”

Guo Shengwei’s gaze darkened momentarily, then he smiled and said, “Very well, let’s begin then.”

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The fight with Xia Xu lasted for about a hundred moves. Guo Shengwei was Xia Xu's master, so Yan Ge dragged it out to about a hundred and seventy moves. Soon, the tip of his sword was pointed less than five inches away from Guo Shengwei's neck.

The audience was in an uproar.

Yan Ge sheathed his sword, took two steps back, and smiled, "Master Guo, please concede."

The crowd fell silent, looking at Guo Shengwei curiously and wondering if he would accept the defeat.

Guo Shengwei remained silent for a moment, then laughed heartily, saying, "Madam Luo's martial arts are astonishing. I admire him."

Mei Chuxi bent down and squeezed into the crowd, trying to slip away.

Behind a nearby rockery stood a dignified and straight middle-aged man. He was Mei Tianzhou, the magistrate. Seeing this, he signaled to his steward, who was around the same age as him.

Mei Fu nodded and quickly ran up to Mei Mengxi, blocking his way and pretending to be surprised, "Young Master, so you're here. Madam has been looking for you."

Mei Chuxi glared at him angrily.

Everyone turned to look, their faces showing expressions of disdain.

In fact, Yan Ge had long noticed that Mei Chuxi wanted to escape and realized that Guo Shengwei deliberately delayed time to create an opportunity for him. There was a hint of irony in his eyes as he said, “Master Guo?”

“You brat, why haven’t you come over yet?” Guo Shengwei reprimanded Mei Chuxi neither too lightly nor too heavily, pulling him in front of Yan Ge. “If I had known you would cause trouble again, I would have taught you a lesson. Hurry up and apologize!”

“I’m sorry.” Mei Chuxi raised his head arrogantly, tilting his chin up to the sky and said lazily.

Onlookers: “…”

Yan Ge carefully examined Mei Chuxi, not hiding his confusion. He didn’t look attractive, nor did he have a pleasant personality, it mafe him confused as to why Guo Shengwei doted on him so much. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but how could this brat captivate his grandfather’s heart that much?

“Master Guo, if you look closely, the young master is indeed talented, with a heroic bearing and remarkable temperament.”

Those who heard Yan Ge’s words laughed inwardly.

Mei Chuxi still took Yan Ge’s words seriously, a smug expression appearing on his face. “Of course! In this prosperous city, I rank second in terms of handsomeness, and no one dares to claim the first place!”

Guo Shengwei’s face turned red. “That’s enough, Chuxi. Say no more!”

“Madam, let’s go,” Huangfu Yuchen spoke up.

Mei Chuxi snorted through his nose and prepared to leave the stage.

Huangfu Yuchen casually waved his left hand, and Mei Chuxi stumbled on his feet, tumbling down the steps before falling flat on his face.

“Ouch!”

He lifted his head in pain, blood flowing from his nostrils, leaving a red mark on his dust-covered face.

Everyone burst into laughter, “Hahaha…”

“Chuxi!” Guo Shengwei quickly walked over to help Mei Chuxi up.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen exchanged a smile and left the Mighty Biao Bureau.

“Are you hungry? Should we eat first or go for a stroll by the lake?” Huangfu Yuchen asked.

Yan Ge said, “Let’s go for a stroll by the lake. We’ll enjoy the food more after getting tired.”

Huangfu Yuchen sighed, “You’re eating for the sake of eating.”

Not long after they had walked a short distance, they sensed someone following them. The footsteps of the person were heavy, indicating a lack of martial arts skills.

The two of them calmly arrived at the lakeside without immediately boarding the boat. Instead, they stood under the willow tree and enjoyed the breeze.

Mei Fu approached them and bowed, “Young heroes, our master would like to meet you.”

“Who is your master?” Yan Ge asked.

Mei Fu replied, “Our master is the City Magistrate.”

He appeared polite and showed no trace of arrogance when mentioning the magistrate.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, “Lead the way.”

The two followed behind Mei Fu, and the more they walked, the more remote the area, and the more interested they became. They didn't believe that the magistrate intended to silence them by killing, so his motives were worth pondering.

The three stopped in an empty alley, where a middle-aged man stood by the wall, waiting.

Mei Tianzhou walked over, "Young heroes."

"Did Magistrate Mei bring us here to seek revenge for his son?" Yan Ge deliberately said.

Mei Tianzhou remained calm, smiled faintly, and spoke candidly, "Madam Luo misunderstood."

"In that case, may I ask what instruction Magistrate Mei has for us?" Yan Ge inquired.

Mei Tianzhou said, "I would like to request a favor from the two young heroes."

"It's quite peculiar," Yan Ge remarked. "As a provincial magistrate with great power, what trouble could Magistrate Mei encounter that he can't resolve and instead seeks assistance from two wandering martial artists like us?"

Mei Tianzhou explained, "I would like to ask the two young masters to kidnap my son."

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen exchanged a glance, both surprised. What kind of medicine was Mei Tianzhou selling in this gourd?

Yan Ge speculated: Could it be that Mei Tianzhou's son drove him to despair, but due to the pressure from Guo Shengwei, he didn't dare to openly sever ties with him? So he wanted to use this method to resolve the matter? However, Mei Tianzhou's candid demeanor didn't match that type of person.

“Why, Magistrate Mei?” Huangfu Yuchen asked calmly.

Mei Tianzhou sighed, “I’m sure both of you have heard. My wife and father in law blindly indulge and protect my son. Although I am a magistrate and have resolved various major cases, I find it difficult to intervene in family matters. The two young heroes possess formidable martial arts skills, even Master Guo, the head escort, is no match for you. I would like to request that you avoid his surveillance, kidnap my son, and hand him over to the people I have already arranged. They will secretly transport him to the military camp. I hope that a few years of training there will make him more sensible.”

Huangfu Yuchen said coldly, “When your son harassed me and my wife at Liuxian Pavilion, wasn’t Magistrate Mei afraid that we would kill him to vent our anger? With our abilities, it would be effortless to eliminate someone without leaving a trace.”

Mei Tianzhou shook his head, smiling faintly, “Young Hero Luo, there’s no need to say such things deliberately. Since the disagreement between you two and my son at Liuxian Pavilion, I have investigated both of you. I can confirm that although you possess strong martial arts skills, you are not the kind of people who bully the weak. On the contrary, you fear no authority, have a sense of justice, and seek to rectify injustice. You are true gentlemen. I believe you wouldn’t do such a thing.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded slightly, and Yan Ge extended his right hand, rubbing his thumb and index finger together, “Well, we can’t help this job for nothing, right?”

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled inwardly at the intentionally greedy expression he made.

“Of course,” Mei Tianzhou took out a gray money pouch from his sleeve, “This jade pendant is a family heirloom worth more than five hundred taels. Please accept it.”

Yan Ge accidentally noticed a patch on the cuff of Mei Tianzhou’s inner garment and waved his hand, saying, “We were just joking with Magistrate

Mei. Your reputation for integrity is well known. It is our honor to be able to assist you. We were planning to go boating on the lake, so if Magistrate Mei feels uneasy, perhaps you could pay for our boat fare."

"Well…" Mei Tianzhou looked at their unwavering expressions and nodded, "Thank you, then. Mei Fu."

Mei Fu handed a bundle of fifty taels to Yan Ge.

Yan Ge said, "We have some matters to attend to tonight, but we will take action tomorrow morning. Once the matter is resolved, we will immediately inform Magistrate Mei."

"I appreciate your efforts, young heroes," Mei Tianzhou said. "I have arranged for people to stay in a civilian house there, and they will send me a message."

After everything was settled, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen left first.

Yan Ge said, "Magistrate Mei has gone to great lengths for his only son."

"Unfortunately, his reputation for integrity has been tarnished because of his inept son," Huangfu Yuchen remarked.

At this time, Mei Chuxi was still throwing a tantrum at the Baio Escort Bureau. He liked women, and he liked men too. He had never seen anyone as pleasing to the eye as Yan Ge, nor had he encountered a man as domineering as Huangfu Yuchen. He desired them. Desire was a terrifying thing. If not controlled properly, it would spread like a virus.

"Grandpa, did you intentionally hide your true strength? How could you fail to defeat a kid?" Mei Chuxi complained as he looked at Guo Shengwei.

Even if Guo Shengwei doted on him, Mei Chuxi's words left him furious. He was already humiliated by Yan Ge in front of everyone, and now his grandson was adding fuel to the fire. But he couldn't say to his grandson: Yes, I can't defeat him.

He could only say, “Granda can tell that those two have a deep background in the martial world. It’s best not to provoke them for now, to avoid trouble for the Baio Escort Agency.”

Upon hearing this, Mei Chuxi knew that he had no hope. If even his grandfather couldn’t defeat Yan Ge, what could he do? But if he didn’t vent his dissatisfaction, he wouldn’t feel comfortable. At this moment, he remembered the Holy Maiden he had met before, and his cooled heart was ignited once again.

“Okay, Grandpa, it’s Chuxi’s fault for being ignorant and causing you trouble. Let me pour you some tea to apologize.”

Guo Shengwei looked at him, relieved that he finally understood. He nodded approvingly, “Good, good.”

After spending some time with Guo Shengwei, Mei Chuxi left the Baio Escort Bureau, walking slower and slower.

Ji Xiang asked, “Young Master, what are you thinking?”

Mei Chuxi smirked and said firmly, “Tonight, we will go to Mount Fan’an!”

“Young Master, you don’t mean to…” Ji Xiang was shocked. He knew that getting involved with the Luna Worshipping Sect wouldn’t end well.

Mei Chuxi replied, “That’s right! I must have the Holy Maiden. Otherwise, I won’t feel at ease.”

“Young Master! You need to think this through,” Ji Xiang earnestly advised, “The Luna Worshipping Cult is a sinister force in the martial world. They will resort to any means necessary. If they discover us, Young Master, you’ll be in trouble!”

“What’s there to be afraid of?” Mei Chuxi said dismissively, “Ji Xiang, is your courage as small as a sesame seed? I understand my grandfather. He disappointed me with Luo Fang and Zhangyang’s matters, but he will make

it up to me in another way. So even if something really happens, my grandfather will solve it for me. Don’t worry.”

Ji Xiang stared at him in silence, unable to say anything.

“I warn you, don’t say a word about this matter, or else I’ll make sure you regret it,” Mei Chuxi patted his head and hummed a tune as he walked away.

Ji Xiang hurriedly followed, sighing deeply.

“The Holy Maiden is a martial artist, she definitely knows martial arts, but Young Master, you don’t… “

“Young Master, I have a plan.…”

MCUS Chapter 110

At the stroke of midnight, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen got out of bed and headed to Mount Fan'an. There was light shining at the mountaintop, indicating that the Moon Worship ceremony was about to begin.

The two approached cautiously, hiding among the trees.

The followers of the Luna Worshipping Sect were all dressed in white, standing in perfect formation. The only person seated was a man in his thirties, with an expressionless face and a pale complexion. His narrow and deep-set eyes were eerie and intimidating. He was none other than Yin Sha, the leader of the Luna Worshipping Sect.

The Holy Maiden Mingyue stood beside him, dressed in a flowing white gown, radiating purity and elegance.

On a nearby altar, a white cloth was laid out, but it bore no object.

Yin Sha looked up at the crescent moon in the sky, gesturing to Mingyue.

The followers knelt to the ground, tilting their heads up toward the moon and closing their eyes.

Mingyue retrieved something from within her robe.

As Yan Ge focused his gaze, he confirmed that it was indeed a moon-shaped white gemstone. Mingyue placed it on the altar, her lips moving, but no sound emerged.

A strange scene unfolded. Under the moonlight, the gemstone emitted a faint white glow. With the passage of time and the progress of the ritual, the glow grew more intense, gradually spreading among the followers.

The entire ceremony was filled with a profound tranquility.

After about half of an incense stick, a figure dressed in white emerged from among the followers. This person had been chosen by the gemstone. His face bore a smile, with an expression that seemed dreamlike, as if he was lost in a trance. His feet moved forward on their own accord, approaching the altar.

However, immediately after, another person stepped forward from the ranks.

Yin Sha and Mingyue exchanged a momentary look of surprise. But neither of them said anything. They attached great importance to the ritual, and since the ceremony had chosen two individuals, both would be offered as sacrifices to the moon.

Yan Ge casually glanced at the second person and turned his head in astonishment to Huangfu Yuchen, blinking as if to say: ‘Am I seeing things?’

Huangfu Yuchen shook his head solemnly. Because the second person to step forward was that “useless” person? How did he end up here?

Yin Sha silently led the followers away, and in no time, only Mingyue and the two chosen individuals remained.

The two men, one on each side, knelt behind Mingyue, facing the moon.

Mingyue closed her eyes, murmuring softly.

Mei Chuxi quietly opened his eyes, gazing at Mingyue with a malicious smile on his face.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen immediately understood. Mei Chuxi was so daring that he had set his sights on the Holy Maiden of the Luna Worshipping Sect.

Seeing Mei Chuxi discreetly pull something out from his sleeve, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen both furrowed their brows.

“If we hadn’t agreed to let Mei Tianzhou’s proposition, it would have been a good idea to let him meet his end at the hands of the Luna Worshipping Sect,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

Yan Ge couldn’t help but feel helpless. “He should consider himself fortunate to have a father with unusually good luck.” Rescuing a scum like him was a truly unpleasant feeling.

Huangfu Yuchen silently flew out, swiftly hitting Mingyue’s acupoint before swiftly flying away with the person.

When Mingyue realized that there was one less person breathing beside her, she opened her eyes and only saw two distant figures. Her face was solemn and dignified, but she did not chase after them. Instead, she continued her devout moon worship ceremony and took out a dagger, stabbing the other sacrifice.

As the red sun rose, two horses—one black and one white—emerged from the city gates of Fancheng, running slowly ahead.

Yan Jin turned his head and looked at Yan Ge and then glanced at Huangfu Yuchen. Neither of them were speaking. Were they quarreling? It couldn’t be. When Yan Ge woke up this morning, he even used overnight iced tea to cool Huangfu Yuchen’s face.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen still felt annoyed at the thought of having to save “scum.” They handed him over to the people arranged by Mei Tianzhou that were wearing masks.

The “scum” realized that he had been “kidnapped” and he yelled at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen for ruining his good deeds. This made Huangfu Yuchen furious and his face was dark. Even Yan Ge, who had a good temper, felt so frustrated that he wanted to cut him with a knife. Mei Tianzhou had to be admired, he endured this son for so long, and Guo Shengwei had spoiled “scum” this for too long!

The two people arranged by Mei Tianzhou were also skilled fighters. Seeing how furious they were, they quickly hit Mei Chuxi’s mute acupoint

and saved his life. However, Yan Ge gave Mei Chuxi's face a heavy punch.

Perhaps they could only feel more at ease when they were further away from Fancheng.

Not long after they left, a carriage driven by Mei Fu went out of the city. Four mounted soldiers rode alongside the carriage.

Seeing the familiar figures ahead, Mei Fu said, "Master, it seems that the two people ahead are Young Master Luo and Madam Luo."

"Oh?" Mei Tianzhou lifted the curtain and said, "It's them. They're riding slowly, catch up."

"Yes."

"Young Master Luo, Madam Luo."

Yan Ge's mood worsened when he heard Mei Tianzhou's voice. He thought of Mei Chuxi and his previously improved mood became worse again, so he didn't say anything.

Huangfuyuchen spoke lightly, "Master Mei, what a coincidence. Where are you heading?"

Mei Tianzhou sighed, "We're going to Lujiang County. There's been some trouble there." He had always regarded Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen as martial artists, so he didn't conceal anything, but only briefly mentioned it.

"That scoundrel has already been taken away. I want to express my gratitude to you young heroes once again."

"Master Mei, there's no need to be polite," Huangfu Yuchen said.

Yan Ge said, "Lujiang County? How coincidental. We are also heading there."

Huangfu Yuchen looked at him with confusion. He thought Yan Ge wouldn't want to hear anything related to "Mei," "Chu," or "Xi" for at least

a day or two. Moreover, Fancheng was not far from Blue Sea City, their original destination.

Yan Ge transmitted his voice with a smile, “Judging from Master Mei’s expression, the matter in Lujiang County is probably not small. It’s a good opportunity to vent our frustrations. Besides, it’s just a slightly longer route.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded in agreement.

Mei Tianzhou smiled, “I didn’t expect such a coincidence. If you two young heroes don’t mind, we can travel together. If the little master feels uncomfortable from being exposed to the sun for too long, he can come and sit in my carriage.”

“Thank you, Grandpa. You can call me Jiacheng,” Yan Jin said sweetly.

“Alright,” Mei Tianzhou looked at him fondly.

Yan Ge rode his horse to the side of the carriage. “Since that’s the case, the two of us will respectfully comply.”

“Jiacheng, would you like to get on the carriage now?” Mei Tianzhou asked.

Yan Jin nodded, and Yan Ge lifted him onto the carriage.

“By the way, Master Mei, may I ask what happened in Lujiang County? Zirui and I were planning to visit there as well. If there’s anything we can help with, feel free to ask.”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were willing to put aside their past grievances with Mei Chuxi and help him. This gave Mei Tianzhou even more confidence in their character. After thinking for a moment, he said directly, “A few days ago, some boatmen from Lujiang County secretly came to find me. They said that the county magistrate of Lujiang County has been not only corrupt and accepting bribes but also imposing additional taxes privately, making it difficult for them to survive. They had no choice but to

travel a long distance to report it to me. According to what they said, it doesn't seem like a false accusation, but this county magistrate, Pan Longmen, and I studied at the same academy. I am quite familiar with his character, and I don't believe he would do such a thing. I am going to investigate this matter during this trip."

Huangfu Yuchen's frowned.

"How many times have you frowned since we left the capital? If you frown any more, you won't look handsome," Yan Ge transmitted his voice.

Huangfu Yuchen raised his lips and replied, "I'll listen to you."

"If this matter is true, that Master Pan will definitely be on high alert. Since Master Mei is appearing as an official, it may startle him," Yan Ge said.

Mei Tianzhou cast a approving look at them. "I planned to visit in plain clothes. The official attire is just in case we encounter bandits along the way. Once we get close to Lujiang County, I will change into casual clothes."

"I see."

"Zirui, how much do you know about Lujiang County?" Yan Ge asked.

Huangfu Yuchen replied, "Just the basic information. Master Mei must know more."

Mei Tianzhou nodded. "Lujiang County is situated in the central region south of the Huang River. The Lu River runs through it from east to west, and there are wide official roads connecting the north and south. It has well-developed land and water transportation, and its prosperity is comparable to a bustling city. However, because of this, people from all walks of life gather here. When moving around in Lujiang County, one must be cautious in all aspects."

Huangfu Yuchen said, "Master Mei, I heard that three years ago, there was a powerful salt gang operating in Lujiang, but it was eventually eradicated

by the court. I assume such things no longer exist now, right?”

Mei Tianzhou replied, “There shouldn’t be. At least I haven’t heard of any.”

Yan Ge pondered for a moment. “The forces in Lujiang are so complicated. If Master Pan does have a problem, it might be dangerous for Master Mei to deal with him alone. If Master Mei doesn’t mind, Zirui and I can help.”

Before Mei Tianzhou could speak, Mei Fu spoke up first. “That would be great. To be honest with you, Master Mei only brought the five of us this time, and I’ve been worried. If the two young heroes can assist us, I would be immensely grateful.”

Mei Tianzhou chuckled. “Mei Fu, you worry too much. After all, I am a magistrate, an official appointed by the court. Can they really do anything to me?”

But after some consideration, he nodded. “The two young heroes are brave and resourceful. If we can have your assistance, things will go more smoothly. I am grateful for your help.”

“It’s settled then,” Yan Ge smiled.

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“Master, young masters, we will soon enter the territory of Lujiang County, it’s about five or six miles ahead.”

“Okay. I will change into casual clothes now, and you all should do the same.”

“Yes.”

Zhao Ying, Qian Xiong, Sun Jiang, and Li Jun, the four soldiers, changed into casual clothes in the forest, storing their official uniforms in a box.

The air in the county town carried a faint smell of various aquatic products, making Yan Ge and the others feel uncomfortable at first, but they soon adjusted. Although Lujiang County was just a county, it was bustling. The streets were wide and clean, and it was comparable to a prosperous city. The sound of horse hooves on the bluestone pavement was particularly crisp.

Mei Fu inquired about the location of the county yamen, and they drove forward along the street. It didn’t take long for them to catch sight of the Lu River. It stretched before them through the dense grove, its narrowest point was at least fifty feet wide. It was called the Lu River because of the lush trees on both banks, their reflection in the water gave the impression that even the river was dyed green. The river flowed swiftly, heading eastward, with a somewhat thrilling momentum. Lujiang County received abundant rainfall in spring, and with the melting of snow from the western mountains, the river surged with waves every March and April.

*LU-GREEN

“Papa, those people aren’t wearing clothes,” Yan Jin pointed in a direction, his face filled with astonishment.

Following his gaze, Yan Ge noticed the various boats moored by the riverbank. Many dark-skinned men, some sitting and some standing, wore only cloth wraps around their lower bodies while leaving the rest of their bodies exposed. Some of them rested quietly, while others drank water or alcohol. Fatigue was evident on their bronze-colored faces.

Yan Ge said, “They are boatmen.” After observing closely, he realized that the boats on the river were propelled by ropes.

Mei Tianzhou said, “Indeed, they are boatmen. The Lu River is almost always deep, making it difficult to build bridges. Whether it’s people or goods like coal, cloth, wood, or daily necessities, they all rely on boats for transportation. When the river is turbulent and rowing becomes difficult, they can only rely on boatmen to pull the boats.” Mei Tianzhou sighed.

“Why aren’t they wearing clothes?” Yan Jin asked, perplexed.

Mei Tianzhou explained, “First, most boatmen come from poor backgrounds. If they wear clothes while constantly having ropes rubbing against their shoulders, combined with sweat and salt, their clothes would wear out quickly. Second, it’s for the sake of preventing illness. They are in and out of the water, sweating frequently. Clothes that get wet and then dry easily lead to sickness. It’s better for them not to wear clothes.”

“Oh,” Yan Jin nodded in understanding.

Mei Tianzhou smiled and ruffled his little head.

Just then, the group of boatmen closest to them stood up.

Mei Tianzhou said, “Do you see the red flag waving on the opposite side? Each boat has its own signal. A few tugs indicate that the cargo on the other boat is ready to be pulled over.”

Indeed, the boatmen pulled the ropes tied to the trees on the riverbank. Each person carried one on their shoulders and the leader of the boatmen shouted, “One, two, three,” and everyone bent down, exerting their strength. Step by step, their muscles tensed, and the ropes quickly became taut, leaving deep marks on their bodies.

The large boat on the other side began to move slowly. The river surged endlessly, causing the boat to sway, making one’s heart rise and fall. However, the boatmen were accustomed to it and highly experienced. They maintained their pace, shouting commands, their backs bending so low that their heads almost touched the ground, gradually pulling the heavy boat closer. Drops of sweat fell from their faces, leaving traces on the ground that quickly evaporating under the sun.

Mei Tianzhou whispered, “The county yamen is on the opposite side. We will cross the river shortly. Zhao Ying, Qian Xiong, you go and discreetly inquire about the county magistrate’s corruption and bribery, as well as the excessive taxation. Be cautious in your inquiries to avoid alerting anyone.”

“Yes, Master.”

After waiting for about a cup of tea, Zhao Ying and Qian Xiong returned with grave expressions.

“Master, the common people are tight-lipped about the county magistrate, unwilling to say much. But it seems that the matter is true.”

Mei Tianzhou remained silent for a while. After instructing Mei Fu to find a place to store the carriage and take care of the horses, the group approached the riverbank with their luggage. A young man who appeared swift in his actions approached them, trying to make a deal. “My Lords, are you planning to cross the river? Would you like to take a large boat or a small boat?”

Yan Ge asked, “What is the difference between a large boat and a small boat?”

The young man smiled and replied, “It’s evident that you are all from out of town. As you can see, the river currents are very strong, and small boats are more dangerous. A slight mistake could capsize the boat. Of course, the price is also cheaper. It’s fifty coins per person, and if you don’t have much luggage, there’s no charge. For larger luggage, it depends on the situation, but at least an additional thirty coins. Large boats are more secure because they have more boatmen pulling them. Each person needs to be paid so naturally, the price is higher, two hundred coins per person. But if your luggage isn’t too much, there will be no charge.”

“Let’s take the large boat,” Mei Tianzhou said. They had a child with them, and he didn’t want him to become scare.

The young man’s smile became even more enthusiastic. Large boats meant more money.

Huang Fu Yuchen said, “We’ll take the small boat.”

Mei Tianzhou looked at him in surprise. “But Little Jiancheng…” He didn’t understand Huang Fu Yuchen’s intentions. Looking at their attire, they didn’t seem like people who were reluctant to spend money. They had been generous with food and drinks throughout the journey. Besides, both Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were there to help him. He had already planned to cover the expenses himself.

“It’s alright,” Huang Fu Yuchen said calmly. “ I’ll watch him.”

Mei Tianzhou looked at Yan Ge for advice. Yan Ge had a slight smile on his lips, appearing calm and composed. He understood that persuading them was pointless.

“Then let’s take the small boat,” Mei Tianzhou said.

The young man looked somewhat disappointed as he led them to a small boat and then walked away to continue his business.

Although it was called a small boat, it wasn’t actually that small. It could accommodate around ten people. After all, if the boat was too small in such

rapid river currents, it would be as dangerous as running on a narrow bridge.

On the boat, there were two boatmen, each with an oar which helped control the boat to some extent.

Yan Ge's group consisted of nine people, plus the two boatmen, making it eleven people. They couldn't fit in any more. One of the boatmen raised a yellow flag and waved it towards the opposite shore. Shortly after, the boat swayed slightly and began to move.

Huang Fu Yuchen used his true qi to control the boat's bottom. Despite the boat rising and falling with the waves, it never tilted forward, backward, left, or right.

The two boatmen exchanged a mysterious glance but felt relieved. For boatmen like them who rowed small boats, crossing the river was always a life-risking endeavor.

Mei Tianzhou vaguely guessed that Huang Fu Yuchen was using his inner qi to manipulate the boat and was relieved and held Yan Jin tightly. Yan Jin grinned and reached his hand out over the boat's side, stirring the water.

Mei Tianzhou pulled his hand back. "Be careful not to catch a cold."

Yan Ge relaxed, leaning against Huang Fu Yuchen. The water vapor on the river surface grew denser, but under the warm sunshine, it didn't feel cold at all. Instead, it was quite refreshing.

Although it felt like a long time for the boatmen, for Yan Ge's group, it was just a short while before the boat safely reached the shore. After the boatmen secured the boat, they wiped away the sweat with the cloth hanging on a tree.

Mei Tianzhou instructed Mei Fu to pay the fare.

Huangfu Yuchen said, "Master Mei, let's go our separate ways for now. You can visit your old friend, and my wife and I will find an inn to settle in.

Once you’re done, come to the inn to meet us.”

“Very well. I’ll trouble both of you to reserve a few rooms for us,” Mei Tianzhou said.

At the entrance of the county yamen, two yamen officials lazily stood there, holding water and fire staffs.

Mei Tianzhou frowned and let Mei Fu approach.

Mei Fu politely spoke while discreetly passing over some coins. “These Official, Master Mei from Fancheng requests an audience with the county magistrate.”

One of the yamen officials asked sluggishly, “What is the purpose of seeing the county magistrate?”

Mei Fu handed over a small silver piece. “Master Mei is an old friend of Master Pan and has come to pay him a visit.”

The attitude of the yamen runner became slightly more proactive. “Wait here. I will go and report.”

In the corridor outside the study, Pan Longmen, the magistrate of Lujiang County, was amusing the birds in a cage.

“Report, my Lord. There is a Master Mei who claims to be an old friend of yours and wishes to see you.”

“Oh? An old friend… Wait a moment,” Pan Longmen said. “This person had conflicts with me in the past. I need to consider whether I should see him or not.”

After speaking in a calm tone, Pan Longmen turned and entered the study, closing the door behind him. He held a vase with both hands and gently twisted it, revealing a hidden door behind the bookshelf!

Below the steps, torches were burning. He descended the steps and arrived in front of a secret chamber. Several lamps were lit inside the chamber, and

against the wall, a person who looked exactly like him was sitting silently on the bed.

Upon hearing footsteps, the person raised his head and watched him cautiously.

“Do you have an old friend surnamed Mei in Fancheng?”

A wave of wild joy surged in Pan Longmen’s heart. Mei, Fancheng! It could only be his old schoolmate, Mei Tianzhou! He struggled to contain his excitement. “Yes, we have known each other for over a decade.” To avoid arousing suspicion, he had to give this vague response.

“Hmph!” Guan Batian snorted coldly and said slowly, “Fine, I’ll let you see him. Just make sure you don’t play any tricks. Send him away as soon as possible. Otherwise, your wife, son, and daughter won’t live to see another day.”

“How could I play any tricks?” Pan Longmen forced a bitter smile. “After being imprisoned by you for so long, I have accepted my fate. I only ask that you don’t harm my wife and children.”

Guan Batian snorted again and threw his official robe at him.

After dressing, Pan Longmen walked out of the study, his mind racing on how to convey the message of his captivity to Mei Tianzhou.

Not far away, a strange young servant hurried over to him with a strange smile. “My Lord, I’ll accompany you.”

Pan Longmen’s heart went cold. “Mmm.”

Almost everyone in the mansion had been replaced by Guan Batian, making it difficult for him to find an opportunity to talk to Mei Tianzhou alone. Although Guan Batian was a bandit, he was extremely cunning. Whenever someone familiar to Pan Longmen came, Guan Batian would let him appear personally to prevent any slip-ups. Furthermore, Guan Batian ensured that Pan Longmen lacked nothing, even occasionally allowing him to bask in

the sun outside to avoid pale skin from prolonged confinement. The purpose was to ensure that he didn’t arouse suspicion in front of acquaintances. It was evident that Guan Batian was cautious and meticulous.

What should he do? What should he do?

MCUS Chapter 112

“Hahaha… Yun Gao, it’s really you!”

As soon as Mei Tianzhou and his group entered, Pan Longmen greeted them with laughter.

“Yun Gao” was Mei Tianzhou’s alias.

Mei Tianzhou found it strange in his heart. Pan Longmen knew his identity, so it would be appropriate for him to show respect as a lower ranked official. He temporarily set aside his doubts and smiled, saying, “Master Pan, how have you been? I came to this vicinity for official business and decided to drop by and visit you. I hope I’m not unwelcome?”

“It is my utmost honor,” Pan Longmen said, leading him to the study and having someone serve tea. “I’m afraid recent official duties have kept me quite busy, and I may not have been a good host to an old friend.”

Mei Tianzhou’s doubts deepened. He was dressed casually, but as a state magistrate, his sudden appearance in the subordinate county should be because of an issue. But Pan Longmen deliberately avoided mentioning his identity and purpose, which was obviously abnormal.

“I wonder where my friend is staying? I will treat my old friend to a meal at Zuixian Pavilion as a welcoming gesture.”

The young servant by Pan Longmen’s side never left. Pan Longmen couldn’t find an opportunity to send a hidden message to Mei Tianzhou and didn’t want him to leave Lujiang County too soon. He could only seize an opportunity to invite him for a meal and then act accordingly. He only hoped that the tacit understanding between old friends still remained.

Unexpectedly, a voice came from outside the door at this time, and a person stepped in. “My Lord, after so many years of not seeing each other, it would be inappropriate for you and your old friend to entertain guests outside. Why not arrange a feast in the yamen? My Lord and his old friend can enjoy a hearty drink together. If you get drunk, you can also rest in the guest rooms.”

Pan Longmen’s smile slightly stiffened.

“Who is this?” Mei Tianzhou asked.

Without giving Pan Longmen a chance to speak, Guan Batian bowed and said, “I am Guan Renjie, Master Pan’s steward.”

Mei Tianzhou stood up, cupping his hands and smiling slightly. “So it’s Steward Guan. Nice to meet you.”

Guan Batian asked Pan Longmen, “My Lord, what do you think?”

Pan Longmen had no choice but to say, “The steward’s suggestion is reasonable.”

Mei Tianzhou said, “With such warmth from an old friend, how can I, Yun Gao refuse? However, there are also my nephew and his family who came with me to Lüjiang this time. They have already gone to find an inn. I will inform them so they don’t have to wait too long.”

Pan Longmen said, “What relationship do you and I have? Your nephew is also my nephew. Naturally, we should invite them to join us for the meal, so as not to appear stingy. Otherwise, they might think the county magistrate is being too frugal to even treat a few more people to a meal.”

Everyone in the study laughed, and the matter was settled.

Mei Tianzhou nodded and took his leave.

Meanwhile, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen finished securing rooms at Ping’an Inn and went out for a stroll. Yan Jin knew they had important matters to attend to and didn’t follow along, and Sun Jiang took him to play.

Heading west along the riverbank, several exquisite leisure boats floated on the water. The sound of women's laughter, men's lascivious chuckles, and the accompanying music drifted out from the boats, creating a sharp contrast with the tired boatmen resting not far away with their heads hanging low.

A middle-aged boatman briskly walked over. "Are the two young masters planning to cross the river?"

Yan Ge had a more amiable appearance compared to Huangfu Yuchen, so he often took the lead in inquiring about information. He deliberately used the accent of the capital and said, "We came from the north for sightseeing and it's our first time seeing boatmen. We find their work quite unique. Could this brother kindly tell us more?" He handed over five taels of silver.

The man/steward happily accepted the silver. "Judging by your accent, you are from the north. Here in the south, rivers are everywhere and boatmen are considered a characteristic of our southern region. With many rivers flowing in the south, there are times when the water level is too high or too shallow, or when sailing against the current means you'll meet dangerous sandbars and treacherous waters. In such cases, one can only rely on the boatmen's strength to row the boats."

Yan Ge said, "I can see at least seventy to eighty boatmen within sight, so the number of boatmen in this entire county must be even more astonishing."

The steward nodded. "Yes, I estimate it to be close to two thousand."

"Seeing how hard they work, I assume their wages are quite high," Yan Ge commented.

The steward said, "Um… the wages for the boat gang vary, and I'm not sure. Young Masters, are you planning to cross the river? I still need to find more passengers."

It turned out there was a "boat gang" involved. It seemed that the power dynamics in Lujiang County were indeed quite complex. Yan Ge didn't

want to arouse suspicion, so he reluctantly allowed the man to leave.

Unconvinced, he said to Huangfu Yuchen, “I refuse to believe that we can’t gather any useful information.”

Huangfu Yuchen smirked and handed him a silver note. “I look scary, so I can only support you financially, my dear.”

“You’re being humble. Isn’t your smile quite charming?” Yan Ge teased, rubbing his face playfully.

“I only smile for you,” Huangfu Yuchen replied seriously.

Yan Ge smiled mischievously, looked around, and noticed a young man in his early twenties staring at him, as if wanting to say something. Amused, he raised an eyebrow and beckoned him over.

The young man ran over with a beaming smile. “Young Masters, are you planning to cross the river?”

Yan Ge casually waved the silver note that Huangfu Yuchen had given him. “The waters of the Lujiang River can be treacherous. If we hire a large boat and enjoy the scenery along the river, it will surely be a unique experience. Would you be interested in this opportunity?”

The young man greedily glanced at the silver note and chuckled. “I can’t read many characters, but I do recognize the characters ‘one hundred taels.’ Young Masters, rest assured, I will serve you well.”

With that, he quickly ran off and said a few words to a man who seemed to be in charge in the distance, pointing towards Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

The man nodded and walked over with the young man.

“If you wish to admire the scenery along the river, there’s no problem. Our large boat has VIP cabins, and we have attentive servants to take care of your needs, ensuring your satisfaction,” the man said.

Yan Ge pointed at the stern-faced Huangfu Yuchen. “I’m easy to please, but this one is difficult to serve. Your servants must be clever and quick-witted. Otherwise, if he becomes unhappy, I won’t be able to help you.”

The man inadvertently looked at Huangfu Yuchen, meeting his cold gaze. He trembled inwardly, cleared his throat to avoid embarrassment, hesitated for a moment, and pushed the young man forward. “This child is called Yun Fei, the most clever and agile. He will take good care of you.”

“Very well,” Yan Ge tossed the silver note to him. “If he performs well, I will generously reward him.”

“Yes, yes!” The man patted Yun Fei’s head, warning him, “You better be smart, or I won’t spare you!”

Yun Fei bowed to Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen respectfully and said, “Young Masters, please follow me. Our boat is right ahead.”

A luxurious large boat was docked by the shore, securely tied to the large trees with several ropes, ensuring minimal swaying. The river waves rolled forward, causing only a slight movement in the boat. Two boatmen placed a wooden ladder on the side of the ship and silently stepped back. The ladder was identical to the stairs in the inn’s restaurant, with each step sturdy and equipped with a handrail. The top of the ladder was securely wedged into the ship’s side.

On the boat, two neatly dressed servants placed a red carpet they were holding onto the stairs, gently shaking it to spread it out, and then used a specially crafted wooden board to press and smooth each step. Following that, two maidens sprinkled colorful flower petals from a basket, and a faint floral fragrance drifted in the air.

Yan Ge nodded in satisfaction and, along with Huangfu Yuchen, stepped onto the stairs, finding them quite secure indeed.

After boarding the ship, two pretty maidens approached. They were well-trained, one held a white towel in each hand, while the other held a wooden basin filled with water emitting a faint steam, indicating it was warm.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen washed their hands, and Yun Fei led them to a small hall. Almost as soon as they sat down, the boat began to move. It was evident that the people on board and those below had excellent coordination.

Moments later, several maidens entered in an orderly manner. Some carried tea sets, some carried snacks, and others held fruits.

Yan Ge glanced at Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen kicked away a bothersome table with one foot and coldly said, “I thought there would be something special on this boat. Don’t you have anything fresh to offer?”

Yun Fei was startled by his kick.

Yan Ge patted Huangfu Yuchen’s shoulder to calm his anger and said to Yun Fei, “Quickly tell us what interesting things there are on this boat.”

Yun Fei hurriedly responded, “Oh, yes, there are. Here’s a list. The Young Masters can choose to watch a play, listen to the zither, enjoy music, appreciate dancing, and if you wish, you can have a maiden or a ‘young master’ accompany you…”

“What’s so extraordinary about these?” Yan Ge raised his chin disdainfully. “Haven’t we seen enough of these in the capital?”

“This…” Yun Fei quickly came up with an idea. “How about I tell you some legendary stories about Lüjiang County? I guarantee you haven’t heard them before.”

“Fine, it can just pass the time,” Huangfu Yuchen swept a cold gaze over the others and said in a low voice, “Why haven’t you all left yet?”

“Yes, yes…” The other servants and maidens hurriedly left the small hall.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen listened for any other sounds outside and returned to their normal state.

Yan Ge glanced at Yun Fei with a half-smile and picked up a cup of tea, taking a sip.

Yun Fei stood by silently, afraid to speak up. After a while, he nervously swallowed his saliva and moved the snacks in front of the two, cautiously saying, “May I dare ask, are both of you from Fancheng?”

“How many boatmen are there in Lüjiang County? And how many boat factions are there?” Huangfu Yuchen replied with a counter-question.

Yun Fei cautiously looked toward the direction of the entrance.

Yan Ge said, “Rest assured, there is no one outside the door or by the windows.”

Only then did Yun Fei speak, “There are nearly two thousand boatmen, and there are more than ten boat factions of various sizes. If the two young masters wish to get involved, it might not be easy.”

Yan Ge chuckled inwardly, “Young man, we haven’t even asked you anything, and you’re trying to probe our background. You’re still quite inexperienced.”

“What about the wages of the boatmen?” Huangfu Yuchen asked again.

Yun Fei replied, “It varies among different boat factions, and the wages for those rowing large boats are different from those rowing small boats. As far as I know, in the most influential boat faction called ‘Pingwen Faction,’ the boatmen earn fifty coins for each row of a large boat and twenty coins for each row of a small boat. Other boat factions offer even less.”

Yan Ge was very surprised, “So low?”

Yun Fei glanced at him and said, “On the one hand, it’s because of the boat faction leaders, and on the other hand, it’s because of County Magistrate Pan… By the way, looking at the two young masters’ splendid attire and extraordinary demeanor, you must have come from Fancheng, right?”

“Why do you think we are from Fancheng?” Yan Ge asked.

Yun Fei explained, “It’s like this. I heard that someone recently went to the prefectural government office in Fancheng to file a complaint against Master Pan, and your demeanor clearly doesn’t resemble that of people from small towns. So, I made a random guess. If I’m wrong, let’s just take it that I’ve amused the two masters.”

“Oh,” Yan Ge smiled faintly, “Someone went to the prefectural government office in Fancheng to complain about Master Pan but he didn’t notice it, it’s quite surprising that you, a mere servant, discovered it.”

Yun Fei’s expression changed slightly but quickly concealed his emotions well, “There’s a saying that goes, ‘Dragons have their paths, while snakes have theirs.’ Even us common people occasionally have our own sources of information.”

“Then why do you think we have any connection with the magistrate?” Yan Ge lowered his head and assessed himself. “Do we look like officials?”

A hint of disappointment appeared on Yun Fei’s face, but he forced a smile, “Actually… no, compared to officials, you look more like noble gentlemen or the young masters of wealthy merchant families.”

Yan Ge nodded inwardly. This kid is quite clever. If he’s guessed correctly, Yun Fei must know the inside story of the person who went to the prefectural government office to complain.

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He suddenly had an idea in his mind. He needed more manpower in the capital, so why not take this young man with him? First, he was clever enough, and secondly, if he helped solve the problems in Lujiang County, he would surely be grateful and loyal to him. So he wouldn't have to worry about loyalty then.

"You're not wrong," Yan Ge said directly, "We come from a renowned merchant family in the north. Are you interested in leaving this place and working with me? With your cleverness, being a servant here wouldn't make the best use of your talents. With proper training, you can become someone remarkable."

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at him and didn't object. He seldom interfered with Yan Ge's business matters.

Yun Fei was taken aback. "Thank you, my lord, for your appreciation. Living by the river is very hard, and I wish I could have the opportunity to leave here. But, I still have unfinished business here. I don't feel at ease, nor do I want to leave like this."

"Well, perhaps we can really help you achieve your wish." Yan Ge said with a mysterious smile.

Yun Fei was startled.

After asking everything he needed to, Yan Ge said, "Let the boat return."

"Yes," Yun Fei took two steps forward and then stopped. "Before you two young masters leave the boat, please kick this young one into the river."

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen exchanged a glance. Even Huangfu Yuchen was starting to appreciate Yun Fei's cleverness.

"Are you sure?" Yan Ge asked. "The water flows very fast."

Yun Fei smiled. "Rest assured, young master I grew up by the river, and I'll be fine."

After an incense stick, the large boat stopped by the shore.

After Huangfu Yuchen kicked Yun Fei into the water, they disembarked without looking back.

The man from earlier hurriedly walked over. "My Lords…"

"You sure know how to talk, but you talk too much," Huangfu Yuchen said arrogantly. "So, you won't receive any reward."

Sure enough, one shouldn't provoke the rich. The man wiped the sweat off his forehead as he watched the two men walk away.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen returned to the inn and found Mei Tianzhou drinking tea in the elegant meeting hall, lost in thought.

Yan Jin was playing chess with Sun Jiang.

"Young Master Luo, Madam Luo," Mei Fu said.

Mei Tianzhou snapped back to reality. "The two young masters have returned."

Huangfu Yuchen asked, "Did Master Mei find anything?"

Mei Tianzhou nodded. "I've noticed a few suspicious points, but I haven't found any leads yet. Or maybe I'm just overthinking. Do the two young masters have time for lunch? Master Pan has invited me to his mansion and I'd like to take the two of you along. First, you can have a clear observation, and second, I hope to benefit from your sharp eyes and see if we can make any new discoveries."

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had already agreed to help him, so they readily accepted. After some discussion, the three of them decided to continue using the Luo family's identities but added one more identity: Mei Tianzhou's nephew and his family, who came from a merchant family. They came to Lujiang County for sightseeing.

At noon, Mei Tianzhou, Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, and Yan Jin appeared together at the entrance of the county government office. Having a child with them would somewhat lower the other party's guard.

Pan Longmen and Guan Batian warmly welcomed them into the mansion.

Upon seeing Guan Batian, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen became suspicious. From Guan's imposing footsteps, they could tell that he possessed martial skills and had profound inner strength. Moreover, he did not possess the slightest hint of scholarly temperament.

As they entered the courtyard, they were surprised by the servants and attendants they encountered along the way; almost all of them were martial artists.

Upon entering the dining hall, everyone greeted each other. Mrs. Pan, Pan Longmen's son Pan Weijie, and his daughter Pan Youlian all paid their respects to Mei Tianzhou. Mrs. Pan and Pan Youlian withdrew, while Pan Weijie stayed behind to accompany the guests.

Pan Longmen raised his cup and said, "Brother Mei, back then at Qingsong Academy, we used to spend many nights discussing various matters, it was a truly joyous time. I still remember how Brother Mei took care of me back then. I never expected to see Brother Mei again. I must raise a cup in honor of Brother Mei."

Mei Tianzhou's hand subtly paused for a moment, then he chuckled and said, "You are now the county magistrate, while I have followed my father's footsteps in business. It is only right for me to toast to you."

The two men exchanged smiles and drank together.

Mei Tianzhou glanced at Yan Ge.

Yan Ge nodded slightly, and Mei Tianzhou no longer mentioned the past. Instead, he engaged in a leisurely conversation with Pan Longmen about the scenic spots along the Lu River, even discussing business matters with ease.

Guan Batian had been on guard, suspecting that Pan Longmen might play some tricks. However, at this moment, he completely let his guard down.

During the feast, the guests enjoyed themselves.

After Yan Ge and the others left the county government office, they only engaged in casual conversations unrelated to important matters. Upon returning to the inn, Mei Tianzhou slapped the table and said in a deep voice, “I knew this matter couldn’t be so simple. It is highly likely that Pan Longmen is being coerced to commit these unlawful acts.”

“Has Master Mei confirmed it?” Yan Ge asked.

Mei Tianzhou replied, “Indeed. It is true that Magistrate Pan and I studied together at Qingsong Academy, but Magistrate Pan is two months older than me. I used to call him Brother Pan, not the other way around. At that time, when I mentioned following my father’s footsteps in business, it was a subtle hint that I had received his implication.”

Yan Ge nodded solemnly. “Master Mei’s words are correct. Zirui and I have also discovered many issues within the county yamen. The most suspicious person is that steward. He has martial arts and doesn’t have a scholar’s temperament. If County Magistrate Pan is truly being coerced, it is mostly likely related to this person.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “There is just one thing that doesn’t make sense. There are no traces of coercion or abuse on County Magistrate Pan, his wife, or children. So, how did that Guan Renjie threaten Master Pan? Could it be that Master Pan has some handle that fell into Steward Guan’s hands?”

*Guan Batian introduced himself as steward Guan Renjie

“That point indeed deserves further consideration,” Mei Tianzhou said. “If Guan Renjie possesses formidable martial skills, then my subordinates are no match for him. I’m afraid I need to trouble the two young masters to attempt to track Master Guan and see if any clues can be found.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Leave this matter to me. Madam, Master Mei, please focus on enjoying your normal activities these next few days.”

“In that case, I am grateful to the two of you,” Mei Tianzhou said.

Yan Ge, Yan Jin, Mei Tianzhou, and Mei Fushun walked slowly along the riverbank.

Yan Ge occasionally glanced at the river, shaking his head. The economic level of Lujiang County was indeed not low, but there was still great potential for development. If he were here, making a fortune would be effortless.

“Why is Madam Luo shaking his head?” Mei Tianzhou asked in confusion.

Yan Ge snapped out of his thoughts. “It’s nothing, Master Mei. From your perspective, is it possible to build a bridge on the Lu River?”

Mei Tianzhou stopped and looked at the river, pondering for a moment. “River Lu’s water level hardly decreases throughout the year, so the possibility of building a stone bridge is extremely low. However, most people in Lujiang have excellent water skills, so it is feasible to construct several suspension bridges. Madam Luo, please take a look. There are many century-old trees on both sides of the river that can be used to connect the two banks with ropes, and wooden planks can be laid on the ropes to facilitate crossing. However, it’s likely that goods still need to be transported by boats across the river.”

An old man fishing nearby overheard their conversation and chuckled, interjecting, “There used to be a suspension bridge over Lu River a year ago.”

Mei Tianzhou showed a puzzled expression. “Why is it no longer there?”

The old man looked around and whispered, “If there’s a bridge, fewer people would take boats, and the boatmen would earn less money. The county magistrate’s tax collection would also decrease. Ah, I’ve got a fish on the hook.”

Mei Tianzhou wanted to inquire further, but the old man only stared at the float, motionless and feigning deafness and muteness.

The group had no choice but to continue walking forward.

Yan Ge leisurely remarked, “Solving the bridge problem only addresses the symptoms and not the root cause. If a bridge is built, nearly two thousand boatmen would lose their livelihoods unless their employment issues can be resolved.”

Mei Tianzhou stared at him without moving.

“Master Mei?” Yan Ge asked with confusion.

Mei Tianzhou said, “I just feel that Madam Luo is not an ordinary person from the martial arts world.”

Yan Ge smiled slightly and evaded the question. “If these boatmen no longer pull boats, what do you think they can do to make a living, Master Mei?”

Mei Tianzhou shook his head. “It’s difficult to say. Most of those who choose to make a living by pulling boats are illiterate commoners who can only support themselves and their families with physical labor. Even if they don’t pull boats, they can only do other physical work.”

Yan Ge nodded. “Indeed. Let me think… The complex influence of Lujiang cannot be completely resolved in the short term. Even if I come up with

some good ways for these boatmen to earn money, their business is likely to be taken over sooner or later by larger forces."

Mei Tianzhou looked at Yan Ge's retreating figure in astonishment, his back filled with contemplation.

Yan Jin raised a finger at him, "Shhh, Papa is thinking about big problems."

——-

In the evening, Huangfu Yuchen returned to the inn in time for dinner.

"How did it go?" Yan Ge asked.

Huangfu Yuchen said, "The Pan Longmen who appeared in the afternoon and the one during dinner are completely different in breathing and gait. I suspect that most of the time, the Pan Longmen people see is Guan Renjie in disguise."

Mei Tianzhou was greatly surprised. "I can't believe such a thing!"

Yan Ge said, "People in the martial world have many means. It's not strange that Master Mei didn't think of it."

Huangfu Yuchen said, "I still haven't figured out that Guan Renjie's true identity. After dinner, I'll go to the county yamen again."

Yan Ge said, "I have some matters on hand, so I can't accompany you. I'll have someone prepare some food for you. If you get hungry in the evening, you can fill your stomach."

Mei Tianzhou said, "Thank you for your hard work, Young Master Luo. If there are any errands, feel free to ask Zhao Ying and Qian Xiong to do them. Tomorrow, I'll take Sun Jiang and Li Jun to visit the common people's homes and see if we can gather any information."

After finishing their meal, Mei Tianzhou and the others returned to their respective rooms.

Yan Ge took out packaged roast chicken, meat buns, and beef jerky from his system backpack, stuffing the small backpack full.

Yan Jin chuckled. “Papa, it’s not like Father won’t come back for several days.”

Huangfu Yuchen raised an eyebrow.

“What do you know?” Yan Ge patted the backpack. “It’s hard to endure the night alone, so having something to eat makes it a little better. However, Zirui, remember to move around after eating. Otherwise, you’ll gain weight.”

Huangfu Yuchen looked down at himself. ‘Did I recently gain weight that my baby decided to remind me like this?’

Yan Ge laughed heartily. “I’m just kidding.”

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Huangfu Yuchen walked over and sat beside him, “Is it not good if I gain a little weight? You’ll find it more comfortable when you hold me.”

Yan Ge automatically moved to the corner.

“Alright,” Yan Ge nodded, “But don’t let your face get fat. It’ll look ugly if your face becomes plump.”

Huangfu Yuchen was speechless. It seemed that he shouldn’t let any part of his body get fat, otherwise he would definitely be abandoned by his beloved.

He kissed Yan Ge’s lips and said, “Alright, I’ll remember. I’m leaving, don’t stay up too late either.”

That night, Huangfu Yuchen stayed on the roof of the county government office. After finishing the food prepared by Yan Ge, he made sure there was nothing suspicious around, took a walk in the yard for a while, and then practiced a set of silent boxing before lying down on the roof for a light sleep.

Yan Ge stayed busy until midnight before finally falling asleep. There was a stack of papers on the table.

After waking up in the morning, he busied himself for more than half an hour before leaving and heading to the blacksmith shop along the riverside street.

Suddenly, a few screams came from the river, and the dozen or so boatmen on the bank panicked and shouted at each other:

“Quick!”

“Pull together! Pull!”

Yan Ge looked up and saw a large boat in the middle of the Lu River slowly tilting to one side. The people on the boat were in a state of panic and ran to the deck. Among them were Yan Jin, Mei Tianzhou, Sun Jiang, and Li Jun. Mei Tianzhou held Yan Jin tightly with one hand and grasped the railing tightly with the other.

With a swift step, Yan Ge walked on the water without a trace. In the blink of an eye, he arrived at the boat. He first held Yan Jin in one hand, and grabbed Mei Tianzhou’s arm with the other, quickly bringing them to the shore and then went back to save Sun Jiang and Li Jun. After five or six trips back and forth, he managed to rescue everyone to the shore before the boat sank.

“Fortunately, Madam Luo was here,” Mei Tianzhou said with lingering fear, “If something happened to Little Jiacheng when he was with me, I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself even if I became a ghost,”

“I just happened to be passing by here,” Yan Ge’s sharp eyes scanned the water below. Was it his illusion? When he was shuttling back and forth between the shore and the boat, he vaguely saw several shadows passing under the water. Were they people or just a school of fish?

The rest of the rescued people thanked Yan Ge one after another, and then turned angrily towards the boatmen, questioning them, “What’s the matter with your rotten boat? It’s reckless to carry passengers when the bottom of the boat is decayed!”

“The bottom of the boat is rotten? That’s impossible!” the steward explained, “We are all people who make a living on the river, how could we do such a thing? We inspect our boat and ropes every day before using them. If there were really any problems, we wouldn’t miss them.”

“Then why did the bottom of the boat suddenly take on water?”

The two groups argued fiercely.

A rescued girl calmed down and walked over with her maidservant, bowing deeply to Yan Ge in gratitude, “Thank you, for saving our lives—”

“No need to offer yourself,” Yan Jin poked his head out from behind Yan Ge, showing his teeth, “My Papa is already married!”

Yan Ge turned his head and glared at him, “Jiang!”

The girl blushed with embarrassment, “I didn’t mean that… I just wanted to thank the young master in person…”

Yan Ge tapped Yan Jin’s head with a “thud,” “Children have no filter, please don’t take it to heart, Miss. It was just a small effort on my part, no need to thank me.”

The girl bowed again, along with her maidservant, and quickly walked away.

Yan Jin pouted at Yan Ge and looked tearful, “Papa…”

Mei Tianzhou fell for his trick and hugged him in his arms, “Madam Luo, Little Jiacheng still young, please don’t blame him.”

Yan Jin secretly made a face at Yan Ge in his arms.

Yan Ge looked up at the sky, wanting to ask Mei Tianzhou, ‘Isn’t it your fault that your son is so useless now?’

After they walked a distance, Yan Ge asked, “Master Mei, how did you end up on the boat?”

Mei Tianzhou replied, “The county office is located south of the Lu River. I thought that it would be less likely for that Guan to vigilant if I went to the north side of the river with Yan Jin. I didn’t expect such a thing to happen.”

Yan Ge looked around and said, “I’m afraid it’s not a coincidence. Someone is targeting you. However, I can’t be certain for now. I’ll wait for Zirui to

come back and see if he has discovered anything.”

Mei Tianzhou looked astonished and angrily said, “They have such audacity! Do they have no regard for the law?”

Yan Ge glanced at the shops on the street and said, “There is a teahouse over there. You can go and sit there for a while. I’ll finish my business and find you to go back together.”

“Alright.”

……

Guan Batian quietly arrived at the front of a mansion. He lightly knocked on the door, and it was opened.

“Boss.”

“Where is Guan Hu?” Guan Batian didn’t stop and quickly walked into the courtyard.

“He is accompanying the second madam.”

“Tell him to come to the study immediately.”

“Yes.”

Guan Batian sat in the study for a while, and a tall and sturdy man, even taller than him, walked in with a smile. “Big brother, you’re back.”

Seeing Guan Batian’s serious expression, Guan Hu restrained his smile. “Big brother, what happened that even troubled you?”

Guan Batian said, “Our good days have come to an end.”

“What do you mean?” Guan Hu’s expression tightened.

Guan Batian said, “Yesterday, a man named Mei came to visit Pan Longmen. Although Pan Longmen didn’t play any tricks, the more I

thought about it, the more something felt off. This man has a special aura in his words and actions. I'm afraid his purpose is not that simple. I arranged for people to monitor their group, and today I learned that Mei Tianzhou planned to cross the river. I deliberately had someone sabotage the bottom of the boat but then the young man who is said to be Mei's nephew-in-law saved him. If Mei was just visiting Pan Longmen, why would he have such a powerful expert with him?"

"Do you suspect that they are sent by the county office? Big brother, could you be overthinking?" Guan Hu was somewhat skeptical. "We have our eyes on almost everyone in the Lu River. It's impossible for anyone to reach Fancheng smoothly."

Guan Batian waved his hand and said, "After traveling the rivers and lakes for so many years, one should be cautious. It's because of our cautiousness that our Xiaoyao Gang has come this far. We can't really confront the court head-on for the sake of money. Besides, we've already gained enough benefits in the Lu River this year. It's time to withdraw when things are still going well."

"Since that's the case, big brother, I'll listen to you," Guan Hu nodded. "But, big brother, how do you plan to extricate yourself?"

A cunning and sinister expression appeared on Guan Batian's face. "I have my own plan. We can make good use of Pingwen Gang and Ping'an Gang, the two largest boat gangs in the Lu River. Today, you all pack up your belongings. Tomorrow morning, I will find a way to provoke a conflict between the two gangs. Let them fight to the death, and we will take the opportunity to leave Lujiang County."

"Understood."

The next morning, the fight between Pingwen Gang and Ping'an Gang broke out, starting from a clash between thirty boatmen and escalating into a full-blown battle between the two gangs. The members of the gangs were filled with bloodlust, injuring people from other boat gangs and spreading the conflict. Meanwhile, Guan Batian and his men quietly mounted their prepared horses, and galloped away.

Less than two miles on the road, two figures standing side by side in white robes startled Guan Batian. He pulled the reins and urged the horse to run faster, attempting to directly collide with the two people to make way.

Huangfu Yuchen lifted his right leg and directly kicked the left front hoof of the horse.

The horse let out a miserable cry and somersaulted in the air.

Guan Batian was greatly shocked and turned pale. After rolling on the ground, he quickly stood up.

Seeing this, Guan Hu and the others hurriedly pulled the reins to stop the horses. “Whoa!”

Guan Batian put his hands together and said, “I kindly ask the two masters to make way for us. We, the Xiaoyo Gang, will pretend that the previous incident never happened.”

Huangfu Yuchen said in a calm voice, “Guan Batian, your crime of impersonating a high-ranking official of the court is unpardonable. For the past year, you have accepted bribes and imposed illegal taxes, causing unbearable suffering to the people of Lujiang County. Did you think you could escape?”

Guan Batian sneered, “You all are people of the martial world, why are you helping the officials? What benefits has the court given you?”

Yan Ge smiled mischievously and said, “Who told you we are people of the martial world?”

“Madam, there’s no need to waste words with them,” Huangfu Yuchen said, “Disable their acupoints first. Pan Longmen and his men should be arriving soon.”

“Understood.”

“Brothers, attack!” Guan Batian shouted with raised arms.

Huangfu Yuchen swiftly moved behind him, sealing his acupoints, and the others were dealt with similarly.

After a while, everyone was immobilized, and they looked at them with shocked eyes.

Shortly after, Mei Tianzhou and Pan Longmen arrived with government troops and arrested everyone.

Mei Tianzhou let out a sigh of relief. “Finally, it’s resolved.”

“Yes,” Pan Longmen chuckled bitterly, wiping off his sweat. “However, I humbly request guidance from Master Mei. Although I was coerced, I will be held responsible for Guan Batian’s crimes…”

Mei Tianzhou patted his shoulder. “This matter cannot be concealed. As for the current plan, Master Pan, you can only report the facts truthfully. The silver that Guan Batian acquired should mostly be here. Return what should be given to the people, and if there are any discrepancies, you can use a written apology instead. I will also submit a memorial to the capital, pleading for mercy for you, detailing your achievements during your tenure in Lujiang and explaining your difficulties. The wise emperor will surely give you a fair judgment. Although you can’t avoid punishment, your life may be spared.”

Yan Ge looked at Huangfu Yuchen, and Huangfu Yuchen nodded slightly.

Yan Ge walked up to Mei Tianzhou and Pan Longmen. “Master Mei’s words are reasonable. Master Pan, there’s no need to be too pessimistic. From what I know, you still have a year left in your term. If you can further develop Lujiang County within this year, perhaps you can redeem your crimes.”

Pan Longmen’s eyes lit up. “Madam Luo’s words are enlightening. I know what I need to do now. Thank you!”

Mei Tianzhou said, “Take these people back and publicly interrogate them to provide an explanation to the people of Lujiang County. It should at least

alleviate their grievances from this past year."

Pan Longmen nodded in agreement. "Master Mei's words are reasonable. I will do as instructed."

Back at the county, the yamen officials beat the gongs and drums, and announced that the Xiaoyo Gang had impersonated the County magistrate, and that the true county magistrate will try the case at the execution ground. The entire Lujiang County was in an uproar, and the execution ground was crowded with curious onlookers.

Mei Tianzhou displayed the gold and silver treasures, including weapons, masks, and other items confiscated from the members of the Xiaoyao Gang. It was a solid proof of Guan Batian and others' crimes, and they were publicly beheaded.

"It is true that County Magistrate Pan was impersonated, but it still constitutes a dereliction of duty. However, this case is unique. This official will immediately submit a petition to the capital for the Emperor's judgment. Before the Imperial decree arrives, County Magistrate Pan is still temporarily in charge of Lujiang affairs, while the county executive and the registrar will supervise him."

"Yes!"

After publicly beheading Guan Batian and Guan Hu, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen followed Pan Longmen back to the county yamen.

Mei Tianzhou asked with concern, "Magistrate Pan, what are your plans for the next steps?"

Pan Longmen replied, "During this past year, I have been under house arrest and pondered many things. The first thing is to build a suspension bridge to resolve the difficulties of travel between the two banks. Additionally, I will reorganize the boatmen's guild. The boatmen's treatment is too poor, and we need to find ways to improve their living conditions. The second is to develop the local fishing industry. The locals can catch fish either for their own consumption or to sell to others in the

county. We can process the fish and sell them to areas in the north where fish is scarce."

Mei Tianzhou nodded approvingly. "There is one issue, though. As Madam Luo mentioned, if a suspension bridge is built on the Lu River, many boatmen will lose their jobs. This point cannot be ignored."

Pan Longmen nodded. "Master Mei and Madam Luo have valid concerns. However, we cannot give up the suspension bridge because of this."

Yan Ge stood up. "The two Lords have important matters to discuss, so we won't disturb you. We'll take our leave."

"Very well, please."

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen left the county yamen and strolled leisurely towards the inn, enjoying the breeze.

"From the look on your face, I can tell you have another brilliant idea, baby," Huangfu Yuchen said. He understood Yan Ge very well; even if he just blinked, he could tell what he was thinking.

Yan Ge reached out and said, "I've decided that every time I come up with a good idea, I'll ask you for one thousand taels."

Huangfu Yuchen nodded readily, "It's only a fraction of your 200,000 taels anyway."

Yan Ge slapped his buttocks in annoyance.

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled lightly, pulled him close by the waist, and playfully bit his lips as punishment.

"Baby, tell me, what did you think of?"

"The answer will be revealed in two days," Yan Ge pushed him away, and briskly walked away with hands behind his back. "Ah, I've realized I'm truly a genius. I've come up with such a great idea."

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled and caught up with him, praising, “Yes, no one can compare to you in terms of intelligence.”

Two days later, Yan Ge mysteriously led Huangfu Yuchen, Mei Tianzhou, Pan Longmen, and others to the riverside.

Zhao Ying and Qian Xiong had arrived earlier, and beside them stood a big object covered in cloth, unknown to the spectators. Many people wanted to uncover the red cloth to find out what it was, but Zhao Ying and Qian Xiong dismissed them.

Mei Tianzhou and Pan Longmen noticed the complex expressions on Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen’s faces. They exchanged a curious glance with each other and grew even more intrigued.

Yan Ge patted Huangfu Yuchen’s shoulder. “Zirui, go and uncover the red cloth.”

Pan Longmen looked at Mei Tianzhou. It was only proper for the Magistrate to personally handle this matter.

Mei Tianzhou remained calm. Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen didn’t care about his identity at all. He had understood this since the first day he met them.

Huangfu Yuchen pulled back the red cloth and raised an eyebrow at the object in front of them.

“Baby, what is this?”

A thick log was horizontally placed between two large trees, with large iron nails securing both ends to the trees. Below the log hung a circular iron wheel with grooves, and a rope as thick as a fiber was wrapped around the grooves, with another iron wheel hanging from the rope.

If there was someone from the modern world, they would recognize this as a pulley system consisting of a fixed pulley and a movable pulley, allowing for effortless lifting.

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Yan Ge didn’t explain, even if he did, no one would understand. He pointed to a wooden box that had been prepared on the side. Inside the box was a large stone. “This thing is called a pulley system. Let’s try out its function. To avoid bias, let someone without internal energy try it.”

Mei Tianzhou was interested and asked, “Can I try?”

“Of course,” Yan Ge closed the lid of the wooden box and locked it. “Master Mei, try lifting this box and see if it’s heavy or not.”

Mei Tianzhou nodded and grasped the handle of the box with both hands, struggling a bit to lift the wooden box. “It’s quite heavy, at least forty catties.”

Yan Ge signaled him to put the box down and used the hook on the movable pulley to latch onto the handle of the wooden box. He said to Mei Tianzhou, “Now, try pulling the rope and see if it becomes easier or more difficult.”

Mei Tianzhou followed his instructions and pulled the rope. As the pulley rolled, the box was lifted, and Mei Tianzhou exclaimed in surprise, “Strange! It’s much easier.”

“Is it true?” The onlookers looked skeptical.

“Let me try,” Pan Longmen also stepped forward and gave it a try, his face filled with admiration. “Indeed, it’s amazing.”

A daring commoner requested to try it as well. Yan Ge nodded, and after trying it, the person also marveled.

Huangfu Yuchen tried it with great interest and had the same feeling.

“Madam Luo, could you explain this?” Pan Longmen asked.

Yan Ge said, “Well, even if I explain, you wouldn’t understand. In short, part of the weight of the stone is transferred to the rope, so it feels much easier to lift. It’s like when one person carries a bucket of water, it feels heavy, but if two people carry it together, it becomes much easier. And with three people, it’s even easier.”

Everyone nodded in agreement, looking at Yan Ge with admiration.

Yan Ge said to Pan Longmen, “Master Pan, you can have the blacksmiths construct more of these devices by the river. It will make it easier for the boatmen to tow the boats. Zirui and I can only help up to this point with the affairs in Lujiang County. As for the rest, Pan Master will have to find a solution on his own.”

Mei Tianzhou asked in surprise, “Madam Luo and Young Master Luo are leaving?”

Yan Ge nodded, “We came here for sightseeing in the first place, and we have already enjoyed the scenery here. Today, we will leave. Our luggage has been packed long ago.”

Mei Tianzhou said, “Madam Luo and Young Master Luo have helped us so much. I don’t know how to thank you…”

“No need for thanks,” Yan Ge said. “You both are good officials, and naturally, we have a good impression of you. If you were corrupt officials, we would have taken action to help the people. Hahaha… Zirui, shall we go?”

“Yes, let’s go.”

Their horses had been brought out by the stable hands and were waiting nearby.

Yan Ge carried Yan Jin in his arms, and Huangfu Yuchen mounted his horse. After bowing to Mei Tianzhou and the others, they set off with a

flick of the reins.

“Master Mei, who exactly are those two?” Pan Longmen asked in a low voice.

Mei Tianzhou had a shocking thought but found it unbelievable. He shook his head and said, “I’m not sure either. But what’s certain is that those two have done more than just help Lujiang County. This pulley system can be used to move heavy objects, not only at the riverside but also at the docks.”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen spent four more days sightseeing and finally arrived at Lanhai City, where they had arranged to meet Jiang Gan and the others. It had been nearly two months since they left the palace.

Gao Feng, Gao Yun, and the other guards took turns waiting at the gate of Lanhai City every day. Gao Feng saw two horses galloping towards the gate from afar, and immediately recognized them as Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. He wore a delighted expression and approached them.

“Young Master, Madam, Little Master.”

“It’s Gao Feng,” Yan Ge pulled on the reins and smiled. “Thank you for your hard work.”

Huangfu Yuchen asked, “Where are the others?”

Gao Feng replied, “They are at the Yongle Inn.”

Yan Jin stretched out his hands to Gao Feng, “Hug, my butt hurts.”

Gao Feng quickly hugged him off the horse with a distressed face.

Huangfu Yuchen handed the two reins to Gao Feng. Gao Feng looked puzzled, and before he had time to say anything, Huangfu Yuchen had already pulled Yan Ge away.

“Madam and I will go have a meal first, and then we will meet you at the Yongle Inn.”
Gao Feng responded smartly, “Understood.”

Now that they were at a coastal town, it was only natural to enjoy a delicious seafood meal. Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen headed straight to Liuxian Pavilion in Lanhai City and ordered a table full of seafood. Crispy fish fillets, fish-flavored shrimp cakes, braised fish fins, kylin stone grouper, braised sea cucumber, shrimp with scrambled eggs, cod with bean crumbs, and Wuliu fresh fish were all served.

After a hearty feast, the two of them didn't rush to the inn. Huangfu Yuchen took Yan Ge's hand and headed towards the seaside.

"Baby, it's been several days since the Zhantian Vine left. Any news?"

"Not yet. Once there's news, it should contact me promptly." Yan Ge had already walked ahead but turned back a few steps to walk shoulder to shoulder with him. "Are you worried?"

Huangfu Yuchen interlocked his fingers with hers. "During this time, I've reviewed all the information I obtained since our first encounter with the Centipede Organization and the fight with the vice leader. I'm afraid that the Centipede's leader still has an insider in the capital city, and this insider is likely someone from the capital, even someone with a close relationship with us. Otherwise, he wouldn't know you so well. Although his ultimate goal may be me, just the thought that there were eyes constantly watching your every move fills me with fear."

Yan Ge pulled him to sit on the soft sand, smiling as he looked into his eyes. "What are you afraid of? You are strong enough to protect me, and I am not weak either, capable of protecting myself."

Huangfu Yuchen wrapped his arm around Yan Ge's waist and placed his other hand on his knee, looking at him seriously. "The fact that they chose to act after we left the capital city shows that they still have some caution. Considering the timing, we will stay in Lanhai City for at most ten more days before returning to the capital. They will definitely take action again before we get back. Baby, we mustn't let our guard down."

"I know." Yan Ge lifted his feet and made a pair of footprints in the sand.

He casually asked, “Zirui, do you have any suspects?”

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “It’s hard to say. After ascending the throne, I promoted some of my own people, and relatively speaking, I relied more heavily on those I personally cultivated. Maybe it caused resentment in some people.”

Yan Ge smiled playfully, “Well, let me tell you from my experience, if someone wants to deal with an emperor, there are only four possible reasons: deep-seated grudges, selling out their country for personal gain, harboring hatred due to love, or plotting to seize the throne.”

“Your experience?” Huangfu Yuchen chuckled. “Did you learn that from a TV drama?”

“TV dramas are a good thing.” Yan Ge lay on top of him, hus long hair flowing down to the ground. “I suddenly realized that there are so many things I can do once we return to the capital. One of them is that I want to produce a TV drama.”

“Aren’t you enjoying yourself outside?” Huangfu Yuchen picked up his hair, gently patting off the sand stuck to it.

Yan Ge replied, “After all, the outside world isn’t our territory. It’s in the capital where we can freely carry out our plans and do whatever we want. Besides, we have already seen most of the scenic spots and done most of the things we can do on this trip.”

“I find it comforting that you think that way,” Huangfu Yuchen said affectionately as he kissed her forehead. “I’m just worried that you’ll feel bored being confined to the capital all year round. The next inspection tour probably won’t be for another two or three years. How about we go to the north and see the different landscapes?”

“Okay.” Yan Ge pulled him up and they ran into the sea. “Let’s go swimming. We can even try… swimming naked.”

Swimming naked? Huangfu Yuchen’s nose felt hot, and he quickly covered it with his hand.

Yan Ge burst into laughter.

After swimming back and forth in the sea and discreetly doing somethings, they emerged from the water, using their inner strength to dry their clothes. They returned to the inn feeling refreshed and invigorated.

Jiang Gan and the others had been waiting outside the inn since they heard the news. They saw the couple walking towards them, chatting and laughing, and quickly approached them with joyful expressions.

“Greetings, young master and madam,” Jiang Gan said.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “You’ve been waiting here all this time? We told you that you didn’t need to accompany us.”

Jiang Gan replied, “We haven’t seen the young master and madam for several days, and we were quite concerned.”

Yan Ge smiled and said, “Zirui and I were also missing you. Let’s go inside and talk.”

Deng Mande took care of reserving a courtyard in the inn. Only their group stayed in the courtyard, ensuring no one would disturb them.

Once they were seated in the reception hall, both sides inquired about each other’s recent circumstances.

Jiang Gan reported, “We arrived in Lanhai City just four or five days earlier than the young master and madam. During this time, we traveled south and accomplished some things based on Madam’s usual methods. I have written down the detailed information for you to review.”

Huangfu Yuchen quickly flipped through the booklet and handed it to Yan Ge.

Yan Ge skimmed through it and nodded. “Not bad. You have succeeded in stealing from me!”

Everyone laughed.

Huangfu Yuchen asked, “Are there any problems in Lanhai City?”

Jiang Gan sighed. “Lanhai City doesn’t have significant issues, but Bazhou does.”

“Bazhou is in the central region, isn’t it?” Huangfu Yuchen asked.

Yan Ge interjected, “I remember Bazhou is one of the cities on our way back to the capital?”

Jiang Gan affirmed, “Yes. Bazhou is located in the central region of Great Han. Apart from the months of June and July when rainfall is relatively high, there is generally a scarcity of water. This year, the situation is particularly severe. The rivers, lakes, and ponds have almost dried up, and it’s impossible to carry out spring planting in the fields. Many people have fled to Lanhai City in the past few days. Young master, since Lanhai City doesn’t have significant problems, why don’t we head straight to Bazhou?”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “It’s already late in the day today. We’ll depart early tomorrow morning.”

“Understood.”

The next day, Jiang Gan and Huangfu Yuchen’s convoy rushed out of the north city gate, and within half an hour, another group of martial artists rushed in from the south city gate.

“Master, we just received news that they left Lanhai City through the north city gate early in the morning.”

“Chase them.”

“Yes!”

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Yan Ge and his group hurried all the way, heading straight to Bazhou. The closer they got to Bazhou, the more refugees they encountered on the road. They were dragging their families along, and walking with weary steps, looking visibly exhausted.

Upon arriving in Bazhou, the group found a restaurant to have a meal. The restaurant was deserted, and the prices for food were exorbitant.

The waiter guessed their thoughts and explained, “Honored guests, you might not be aware, but Bazhou and several nearby towns have experienced severe drought this year. Most of the rice and vegetables are brought in from other places, hence the higher prices. However, our restaurant has a top-notch chef, and I guarantee that you won’t regret your meal.”

Deng Mande gave the waiter some money and sent him away.

After finishing their meal, they found an inn. Huangfu Yuchen instructed everyone to disperse and gather information, while he and Yan Ge personally went out to explore.

The two of them rode their horses out of the city and casually followed the road until they reached a village. The vast fields along the road were dry and barren, and the vegetables in the gardens had yellowing leaves, struggling to survive. The ponds of about three meters deep had long dried up, leaving only shallow muddy water in the small depressions at the bottom. All the water plants had withered, and a single step would cause the dry and brittle leaves to shatter.

At the village’s exit, several farmers gathered under the shade of a tree, their faces filled with hardship and helplessness. They still had some stored

food to last them for a while, hoping that before their provisions ran out, the government would provide them with assistance or that a miracle would occur, and a heavy rain would bring them hope.

Yan Ge gestured for Huangfu Yuchen to stay in place while he walked over, wearing an elegant and graceful smile. “Uncles, we are passing through this place. I wonder if I could trouble you for a bowl of water?”

One of the men stood up. “Wait here.”

Before long, he came back with a large bowl of water.

Yan Ge took the bowl and drank a big mouthful of water, smiling gratefully. “Thank you, uncle. I heard that this area has been suffering from drought, and I thought I would surely die of thirst on this journey.”

The man nodded. “Indeed, the drought is severe. Fortunately, the village’s wells still have water, which meets our basic needs. But as for the fields… sigh, I’m afraid there’s no hope. In our village, there were over seventy households, but now there are only a little over forty remaining.”

Yan Ge felt somewhat relieved upon hearing that drinking water wasn’t in short supply.

“Not to conceal anything, I have a friend with some connections in the government. I wonder if you could guide us around the village so that I can inform him of the situation here. Perhaps he can help you find a solution.”

“Is that so?” The man was skeptical and glanced at the other villagers.

The other villagers also wore expressions of disbelief.

Yan Ge said, “Just show us around. Trying might still bring some hope. If we don’t even try, there will be no hope at all.”

The man nodded. “you’re right. Fine, I’ll show you around.”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen followed the man into the village, with several curious villagers trailing behind. Huangfu Yuchen observed the houses and

fields, while Yan Ge kept his gaze fixed on a tree with numerous fruit resembling hanging broad beans. Along the way, he had already seen seven or eight of these trees, with two particularly large ones that would need two people to be able to fully embrace them.

Yan Ge was so engrossed that he almost bumped into the tree in front of him. Huangfu Yuchen reached out his long arm and hooked Yan Ge's waist. "If you tilt your head any higher, your neck might snap."

"Uncle, what kind of tree is this?" Yan Ge was completely absorbed and asked the man leading the way.

There was no need for the man to answer, Huangfu Yuchen responded disapprovingly, "This is a soapberry tree. There is one in our family's garden."

The uncle also chimed in, "It's a soapberry tree indeed. Its fruits can be used for washing clothes, nothing remarkable. We pick a lot of them every year and store them for later use."

Yan Ge shook his head, suppressed his thoughts for a moment, and asked again, "Are there many trees like this in the village? What about other nearby villages?"

Another uncle couldn't help but interject, "Plenty of them. You can find this type of tree everywhere around here."

Yan Ge sighed and noticed a piece of wood lying on the ground not far away. He pulled Huangfu Yuchen towards it and sat down, shaking his head. "You people, you don't realize the treasure you have."

The villagers exchanged confused glances. What does he mean?

Yan Ge pondered for a moment and said, "Here's the thing. Do you have mature soapberries in your homes? We would like to buy some."

The uncle generously replied, "Those things are not worth much. If you want them, I'll give you some."

Yan Ge smiled and shook his head, “We’ll pay for them. Around ten catties should be enough. Once I transform them into something, you won’t think they are worthless anymore. Zirui, I’ve found another business opportunity.” He gestured to Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen generously took out a one-thousand silver note.

Yan Ge grinned with satisfaction. He would slowly make back his 200,000 taels.

The uncle brought out a large bag. “There are more than ten catties in here. Just give me a few coins.”

Yan Ge thought for a moment and decided decided not to give too much. He only gave the uncle one hundred coins. It wasn’t wise to arouse jealousy among the other villagers during these special times.

Huangfu Yuchen tied the bag to the horse’s back, Yan Ge thanked the uncle, and they left together.

“Baby, what exactly are you planning?” Huangfu Yuchen asked. “Do you want the people of Bazhou to make money from soapberries?”

“Yes,” Yan Ge replied. “Soapberry trees are excellent. They withstand drought and cold weather, which makes them perfect for Bazhou. The villagers only know how to use soapberries directly for washing clothes, but they are unaware of the possibilities for processing and improving them. If successful, we can sell them in other regions and make a lot of money! Even if their crops fail this year, they should be able to sustain their livelihoods by selling this valuable commodity.”

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled, “Do you know how to process them?”

“Yes, I do. I’ll show you a sample once I make it.” Yan Ge replied confidently. Even if he didn’t know, he could always check the system’s store for recipes.

Indeed, there were recipes available, although they were not cheap, costing five hundred taels. After arriving in the city, Yan Ge instructed Huangfu Yuchen to buy various spices, soybeans, and dried pig pancreas.

Back at the inn, while the others hadn't returned yet, Yan Ge asked an attendant to cook and mash the soapberries. With all the preparations in place, he chased Huangfu Yuchen out of the room, not allowing him to see what he was doing, creating an air of mystery.

Huangfu Yuchen had no choice but to take a book and lie down on the soft couch in the hall, faintly catching a whiff of fragrance emanating from the room.

After nearly half an hour, Yan Ge emerged with a smile on his face, holding a cup of tea in both hands, and handed it to Huangfu Yuchen.

"Zirui, have some tea."

"Thank you, baby." Huangfu Yuchen sat up, took the teacup, and opened the lid to take a sip. However, he found that the purple liquid inside the cup didn't move at all; it was actually solid, exuding the scent of osmanthus flowers. He raised an eyebrow and glanced at Yan Ge.

"Hahaha…" Yan Ge burst into laughter, leaning against Huangfu Yuchen's shoulder.

Huangfu Yuchen bit him playfully, then laughed for a while before stopping.

"I couldn't find anything suitable as a mold, so I had to use a teacup instead."

"This is your improved result?" Huangfu Yuchen turned the teacup upside down in his palm, and the solid substance fell into his hand, emitting a pleasant fragrance and feeling smooth.

"Yes," Yan Ge said. "This thing is called 'soap.' It can be used for washing the face, bathing, and even for laundry. I made this one with the scent of

osmanthus, but it can be made in many other flavors, such as rose, mint, and purple grass. In addition to working on the fragrance, we can also experiment with colors and shapes. It's bound to be popular among women. The cost of making one soap is at most two or three coins, but if sold, even if it's priced at fifty coins, it won't be considered expensive."

"Baby, you've worked hard," Huangfu Yuchen embraced him, letting him sit on his lap. "even if you want teach them the soap-making process, you can also make soap in the capital and it won't affect them"

Yan Ge nodded, "I intend to do that. However, I'll make more refined ones, trying not to compete with them for profits."

"Leave that to me. We must keep the first soap you made as a memento." Huangfu Yuchen said and was about to put the soap into his own bag.

Yan Ge's face flushed, and he reached out his hand, "Give that one to others as a sample, this one is for you."

Huangfu Yuchen looked at the heart-shaped soap in Yan Ge's hand with surprise. It was polished smooth, with a purple-red color, resembling a real heart, and emitted the fragrance of roses.

He took the soap, a gentle smile on his lips, and gazed lovingly into Yan Ge's eyes, "Can I eat it?"

Yan Ge quickly shook his head, "No!"

"Then I'll eat you." Huangfu Yuchen chuckled softly and kissed him deeply.

Lunchtime had passed, and Jiang Gan and the others began to return one by one.

"Why are you so slow?" Huangfu Yuchen asked.

When they didn't see Yan Ge, everyone tactfully refrained from asking.

Jiang Gan’s mood was quite sour, considering what they had encountered and heard today. “Young Master, Dr. Zhang and I pretended to be villagers from Sanshui Village and sought the magistrate’s help regarding the drought situation. The magistrate was not in his office, but we eventually found him at a restaurant. It turns out he was being specially entertained by a wealthy merchant from the city. After the banquet ended, we informed him of the real situation and requested that he open the granaries to aid the people in distress. He bluntly refused, saying that the grain in the granaries was meant to be used only in dire emergencies. When I asked him to find a solution for the affected people, he completely ignored us and hurriedly left in his sedan chair.”

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Huangfu Yuchen had an expressionless face as he asked Yang Zhuo, “How is the situation in the affected counties?”

Yang Zhuo replied, “I went to nearby counties with Gao Feng to investigate. The rivers, reservoirs, and dams have no water left. Fortunately, the water wells in each village haven’t experienced a drastic decrease in water levels and are still able to supply water normally. However, if the drought continues, the situation will be difficult to predict.”

Gao Feng added, “The magistrates of Xin County, Fu County, and Zhoupu County visited the villages to assess the situation. They opened the granaries and distributed half of the relief grain to stabilize the people’s hearts. The other half of the grain was not distributed hastily. The magistrates of Qingshan County, Nan County, and a few other counties did nothing.”

“We also followed Madam’s instructions and inquired about the local specialties. Peaches, grapes, and other crops have been affected by the drought, so this year’s harvest will inevitably be poor. Lotus roots, in particular, cannot survive,” Gao Yun chimed in.

“You all should have your meal first, and later we will go to the magistrate’s office,” Huangfu Yuchen said, then turned and went into the inner room.

Half an hour later, Huangfu Yuchen woke up the sleeping Yan Ge.

“Baby, wake up…”

“I still want to sleep,” Yan Ge yawned and rubbed his eyes. “I’m so sleepy, once I fall asleep, I don’t want to wake up.”

“Stop pretending, will you come or not?” Huangfu Yuchen lightly stroked his smooth shoulder.

Yan Ge became alert. “What’s going on?”

Huangfu Yuchen briefly explained the situation.

“Did Jiang Gan suggest any good ideas?” Yan Ge asked again.

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “He did. He said…”

After listening to Huangfu Yuchen, Yan Ge shook his head and patted his shoulder. “Compared to Jiang Gan, we are both naïve children.”

“Yes, you’re even more naïve than me,” Huangfu Yuchen nodded with a serious expression.

Yan Ge smirked and called out, “Master Jiang, are the clothes ready?”

“Madam, they are all prepared,” Jiang Gan’s enthusiastic voice could be heard.

Not long after, Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, Yan Jin, Deng Mande, Jiang Gan, Dr. Zhang, Yang Zhuo, Gao Feng, and Gao Qu, all dressed in tattered clothes, hurriedly ran to the entrance of the magistrate’s office like they were escaping.

“Hey, hey, who are you people?” Two yamen officials quickly extended their water and fire sticks to block them from entering.

Yan Ge anxiously said, “These officials, please let us in. We have urgent matters to report to the magistrate!”

The yamen officials looked at their ragged clothes with disdain and said, “You look like you’re fleeing. What important matters could you have? Not just anyone can enter the magistrate’s office! Go away, stand aside.”

While speaking, one of the yamen officials was about to strike Yan Ge’s back with the stick.

Huangfu Yuchen stepped forward and kicked him to the ground.

“You, you…” The yamen official winced in pain as he lifted his head.

The other yamen official glared and waved his stick, ready to help.

Yan Ge lifted his leg and kicked him down as well. He took out a bar of soap and proudly said, “Do you know what this is? Probably not! I’m here to give the magistrate a solution for disaster relief! You won‘t get away with hindering the magistrate’s good deeds!”

The yamen official had never seen what Yan Ge was holding, but it emitted a pleasant fragrance and clearly wasn’t ordinary. He didn’t dare to argue after being kicked, so he quickly got up, took the soap from Yan Ge’s hand, and ran inside. “Wait, I’ll go report to the magistrate!”

Before long, a group of people stood in the reception hall of the magistrate’s office.

Magistrate Geng Shaojie sat in the upper seat. When he saw the attire of Yan Ge and the others, a hint of disgust flashed in his eyes. However, he concealed this emotion when his gaze fell on the soap on the table and asked gently, ”Who are you? What brings you here?”

Yan Ge began, “Master, I…”

Huangfu Yuchen coughed lightly. “I” – what kind of term is that?

*Yan Ge used “ ”, which is a sloppy way if saying “I”

“This little one came from a small county down below. Since childhood, this little one has liked to ponder some peculiar things…”

Geng Shaojie’s brows furrowed so tightly they could squeeze a fly to death.

Jiang Gan, Doctor Zhang, Gao Feng, and the others all lowered their heads, struggling to hold back their laughter.

Huangfu Yuchen maintained a composed expression with great self-control.

“This peculiar thing was made by me, it’s called ‘soap.’ It can be used for washing the face, bathing, and even for laundry. It can be made in various scents, such as osmanthus, rose, gardenia, and so on. Initially, I planned to keep this soap-making business to myself. It would definitely earn a lot of money. However, there is a cousin of mine…”

“Cousin?” Geng Shaojie’s brows furrowed even tighter, but his mind started to become active. Soap, something that has never been seen in the market…

“No,” Yan Ge shook his head, “not a cousin. He is someone related to me by blood, the same generation, with the same surname, a few years older than me, but not sharing the same father as me.”

Huangfu Yuchen looked at Yan Ge, his eyes filled with amusement.

Jiang Gan and the others were a little dizzy from Yan Ge’s explanation.

Geng Shaojie’s face became wrinkled, not understanding the situation.

The steward reacted quickly, “It’s still a cousin.”

Yan Ge looked at him approvingly, “Yes, you’re clever. In official terms, he is my cousin from my father’s side.”

The steward rolled his eyes. He didn’t feel honored to be praised as clever by someone like this person.

Geng Shaojie impatiently asked, “Okay, a cousin. What about this cousin of yours?”

“He’s a shameless scoundrel of the 8th level! He wants to snatch my recipe!”

“Pftt…” The steward couldn’t help but burst into laughter.

“Why are you laughing? Laugh again, and I won’t speak anymore!” Yan Ge said angrily.

Geng Shaojie gave the steward a fierce glare.

The steward covered his mouth.

“This cousin wants to steal my recipe!” Yan Ge sighed deeply, “I’m young and not as strong as him. I can’t fight him. So I had to escape to Bazhou with the help of these villagers. People say, ‘No business without trickery,’ so I dare not sell my recipe to businessmen. But the master magistrate… “

“Magistrate!” Geng Shaojie couldn’t bear it any longer and corrected him.

“Yes, the magistrate is an official and will definitely not bully us common people, right? So, I want to sell this recipe to the magistrate. With the current drought, everyone is having a hard time. I won’t ask for much, just fifty taels of silver. Magistrate, this soap made from soapberries can be produced abundantly in Bazhou. If we can teach the local people how to make soap and sell it to other places, the common people will have money to buy food. Doesn’t that solve the problem of the drought? Right?”

Geng Shaojie and the steward’s eyes lit up. This magical recipe was definitely something they would keep for themselves to make money. They seemed to see mountains of gold and silver right before their eyes!

Geng Shaojie nodded repeatedly, laughed heartily, walked up to Yan Ge, and patted his shoulder. “Good, good! This will surely solve the drought situation, no doubt about it. Someone, bring fifty taels of silver.”

“Wait!” Yan Ge stopped him. “I have one condition.”

Geng Shaojie patiently asked, “What condition? Tell me.”

Yan Ge said sternly, “Although the steps for making soap are clearly written in the recipe, there are many important details that need attention. I hope

that Master magistrate can allow me to personally teach the villagers how to make soap, ensuring that every piece they make is of good quality."

"That won't be necessary," Geng Shaojie replied, "as long as you give me the recipe, I can find skilled craftsmen throughout Bazhou. Once they learn it, it will be much easier for them to teach the people."

"In that case, let me be the one to teach these skilled craftsmen. They will definitely learn quickly with me as their instructor! It is a critical time now, and it also prevents the soapberries from going to waste. Isn't that right, Master magistrate? I am willing to serve Magistrate Da Ren!" Yan Ge said.

"No need," Geng Shaojie handed him the silver, "give me the recipe. I will take care of everything."

"I can't do that," Yan Ge hesitated, "how can I be sure that you won't sell the recipe to someone else? I have heard people from the academy say that 'rare things are valuable.' This business is unique, and it must be worth a lot. You won't sell it again, right?"

"I won't," Geng Shaojie said patiently.

"And you won't use it to make money for yourself?" Yan Ge asked again.

"I'm telling you!" Geng Shaojie restrained himself and pulled Yan Ge aside, whispering, "Here's the deal. I will give you one hundred taels of silver, and you give me the recipe. One hundred taels of silver will be enough for you for ten or eight years."

"You definitely want to use this house to make money for yourself, don't you?" Yan Ge looked at the two silver ingots in his hand, showing a hesitant expression.

"I don't mind telling you. I do indeed want to use this business to make money for myself," Geng Shaojie changed his tone, "have you considered it? Will you sell it or not?" He gestured with his eyes, and four yamen officials blocked the door.

Yan Ge's expression changed as well. He walked over to a table and sat down, reaching for the teapot. Huangfu Yuchen took the tea that had already been poured and used his true qi to cool it down before handing It to him.

Yan Ge took a big sip, "I'm exhausted. My tongue almost feels numb. Zirui, you owe me a big feast for dinner."

"Alright," Huangfu Yuchen affectionately ruffled his hair, after refilling his tea, he walked calmly to the seat at the top, his icy gaze fixed on Geng Shaojie.

Yan Jin, Jiang Gan, Gao Feng, and the others finally dared to burst into laughter.

"Madam, you are truly talented," Jiang Gan laughed until he was out of breath, "If I didn't know you were pretending, I would have definitely taken you for a real villager."

"Hahaha! Exactly," Doctor Zhang said, "I feel the same way!"

Gao Yun and the others couldn't contain their laughter either, "We feel the same, we admire Madam to the utmost!"

"This is 'acting.' Learn a thing or two," Yan Ge said, feeling quite pleased with himself.

"Presumptuous! Do you think you can sit in that position?" the steward shouted at Huangfu Yuchen.

"You're the one being presumptuous! Kneel down!" Yan Jin stepped forward with one hand on his waist, pointing at Geng Shaojie and scolding him. Unfortunately, his voice was too milky and lacked authority.

Huangfu Yuchen raised an eyebrow. He picked up Yan Jin and patted his plump bottom, placing him on a nearby chair.

"Magistrate Geng, do you recognize this item?" Huangfu Yuchen placed a gold medal on the table.

Deng Mande took the gold medal with both hands and showed Geng Shaojie the front and back. The front displayed a square and solemn character ‘Emperor,’ while the back depicted an iron drawing of a silver hook with the character ‘Imperial Inspector.’

Geng Shaojie’s legs went weak, and he knelt down, “Im-Imperial Inspector…”

The steward and the yamen officials at the door turned pale, and they quickly knelt down, trembling.

“Geng Shaojie, you have quite the audacity!” Huangfu Yuchen’s anger intensified, but his expression remained calm, and his voice grew colder, “With the drought in Bazhou, the people are suffering, and finally, there is a solution to ease their grievances. Yet, you, instead of serving the public, have chosen personal gain, betraying your duty and the country. Do you think that because this place is remote, you can be the master?”

Huangfu Yuchen slammed the table, causing it to crack and cups to shatter.

“I dare not! I dare not!” Geng Shaojie’s face turned pale, and he knocked his head against the ground, “I was just momentarily confused. Please forgive me, Imperial Inspector.”

“Take him out! Give him two heavy beatings with the plank,” Huangfu Yuchen ordered.

“Yes!” Gao Feng and Gao Yun stepped forward, escorting Geng Shaojie out. Outside, the sounds of beating with a club could be heard.

After a while, Gao Feng and Gao Yun brought Geng Shaojie back in.

Geng Shaojie’s black hat was crooked, covering half of his head, and his hair was disheveled. He adjusted his hat and said in a disheveled manner, “I truly acknowledge my mistake. Please forgive me, Imperial Inspector.”

“Whether you are guilty or not, it is not for me to decide. The Emperor will have the final judgment,” Huangfu Yuchen said in a calm tone, “Now, stand

up.”

“Yes,” Geng Shaojie, feeling flustered and chaotic, obediently stepped aside.

“How is the drought situation in Bazhou?”

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The imperial inspectors arrived in plain clothes for a secret visit, and Geng Shaojie suspected that they had already investigated the situation thoroughly. He dared not hide anything and truthfully recounted everything.

“Fortunately, I arrived here before the situation worsened. Otherwise, the people of Bazhou would have been furious, and even if you had ten heads, it wouldn’t have been enough to appease them,” Huangfu Yuchen coldly stared at him.

“Yes, yes… this official is guilty,” Geng Shaojie spoke softly, not daring to raise his voice.

Huangfu Yuchen asked again, “How many skilled craftsmen are there in the prefecture?”

Geng Shaojie replied, “If we gather them all, there are more than thirty skilled individuals.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Summon them as soon as possible. Tomorrow morning, I will arrange for someone to teach them how to make soap. Afterwards, you will arrange for them to spread the soap-making skills to the cities and counties of the prefecture, making soap a distinctive industry of this region. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” Geng Shaojie hastily replied, “I will remind them to keep the techniques secret during the teaching process, so that they won’t be learned by people outside our prefecture. Additionally, I will post notices instructing the people of our prefecture not to sell the soap nuts to outsiders, and we will send people to purchase the soap nuts from other regions.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Your mind seems quite agile. Why don’t you apply it to official matters?”

“Yes, yes, I will definitely change, I will definitely change,” Geng Shaojie nodded repeatedly.

With a cold snort, Huangfu Yuchen stood up and left with a stern expression. “As the imperial inspector, there is no need to see us off.”

Geng Shaojie respectfully escorted them to the entrance of the reception hall and watched their figures disappear before daring to wipe the sweat off his forehead.

Back at the inn, Huangfu Yuchen gathered everyone together.

“You will learn how to make soap from Madam today, and tomorrow you will be the ones teaching others,” he instructed.

“Yes, Young Master,” they replied.

Du Juan was a woman with the ingenuity and was a quick learner, Yan Ge simply assigned her the task of teaching and dragged Huangfu Yuchen to go relax, avoiding any teaching duties.

Two days later, the number of people from the martial world suddenly increased in Bazhou and Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge sensed that something was about to happen. However, they had many important matters to attend to in Bazhou and had no intention of getting involved.

Yan Ge was busy designing the soap production process to be implemented after their return to the capital, while Huangfu Yuchen delegated his administrative duties and accompanied Yan Ge, pouring tea and water for him. Yan Ge jokingly remarked that Huangfu Yuchen’s skills in serving him were becoming increasingly proficient.

“Huh? There’s news from the Zhantian Vine.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s expression turned serious. “What is it?”

Yan Ge focused his senses and furrowed his brows slightly, “It was trailing that woman all the way to the capital…”

Huangfu Yuchen’s face changed slightly.

A loud thud came from the room.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen turned around to see Yan Jin, who had been scribbling and drawing on a small table, suddenly collapse to the ground, motionless.

“Yan Jin!” Yan Ge’s face turned pale, and he tried to open the system backpack, but it had closed again.

Huangfu Yuchen swiftly moved forward, picked up Yan Jin, and returned to Yan Ge’s side, handing him Yan Jin with a grave expression, “Same symptoms as last time.”

Yan Ge examined Yan Jin’s pulse and nodded, “Indeed, exactly the same. This is too strange.” Yan Jin had mentioned that he felt no discomfort during his unconsciousness, so he wasn’t as worried as the last time.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Let’s try the Huiyuan Pill first.”

As he spoke, he took out his own pill but Yan Ge stopped him, “Keep yours for emergencies. Use Yan Jin’s.”

After feeding the Huiyuan Pill to Yan Jin, he showed no reaction.

Yan Ge had no choice but to place him back on the bed, frowning and pondering, “Where could the problem lie?”

“Don’t think too much for now.” Huangfu Yuchen held his shoulder, planting a gentle kiss on his forehead and trying to ease his tension with a relaxed tone. “Perhaps he just needs a good sleep. Stay with him here, and I’ll have some snacks sent over for you.”

Huangfu Yuchen closed the door but his expression turned grave. He beckoned to Gao Feng in the courtyard, and the two of them walked to a

secluded spot.

“Young Master, what are your orders?” Gao Feng respectfully asked.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Yan Jin is plagued by a strange illness and is unconscious. Madam is currently staying by his side. I need to resume the identity of Luo Fang and search for clues outside, which makes it inconvenient for me to be with them. Therefore, I’m temporarily entrusting Madam and Yan Jin to your care. You must protect them well, or else heads will roll!”

“Understood!” Gao Feng replied solemnly. “But what if Madam inquires about your whereabouts?”

Huangfu Yuchen furrowed his brow, “It will be dangerous if Madam were to show up as Zhamgyang. In any case, try to keep it from him. If I haven’t returned by the time you finish handling matters in Bazhou, return to the mansion. Don’t worry about me; I’ll join you as soon as possible.”

“Madam is sharp, I’m afraid…” Gao Feng hesitated.

Huangfu Yuchen was helpless, and he thought of Jiang Gan, “Inform Master Jiang of the situation. He should have a solution.”

“Yes.”

Huangfu Yuchen quietly left the inn and changed back to his appearance as Luo Fang, appearing in the eastern part of the city. Yan Jin’s second unexplained unconsciousness aroused an incredible speculation deep in his heart. Although it seemed highly unlikely, he couldn’t ignore the possibility.

Yan Ge had once said that Yan Jin wasn’t an ordinary person but a being akin to a god. Therefore, the likelihood of an ordinary person causing harm to Yan Jin was low. From this, he deduced that someone who was also not ordinary might have done something to Yan Jin without his or Yan Ge’s knowledge.

Yan Jin’s extraordinary existence, along with the existence of the Zhantian Vine, indicated that there might be a third extraordinary entity in this world.

Yan Jin first fell unconscious in Xiguan Pass, and the second time in Bazhou. It was highly possible that the entity responsible for harming Yan Jin was currently in Bazhou. Since their departure from the palace, they had encountered many martial artists, and now so many of them had inexplicably appeared in Bazhou. Among them, there might be overlooked clues related to Yan Jin’s unconsciousness. Even if it was just a possibility, Huangfu Yuchen couldn’t let it go. His plan was to first understand why these people had come to Bazhou. To avoid endangering Yan Ge, he had no choice but to keep It a secret from him.

Inside the city of Bazhou, inns, restaurants, and teahouses were almost completely occupied by martial artists.

On the second floor of a restaurant, a martial artist was having a meal when he inadvertently spotted a person in white walking on the street. He forgot about the food already at his mouth and shouted loudly, “There is Luo Fang!”

Huangfu Yuchen raised his head and met the person’s gaze. He arched an eyebrow lightly, surveying the surroundings. The nearby martial artists stirred, their gaze hostile as they slowly approached him.

“So many martial heroes suddenly coming to Bazhou, could it be all because of this young master?” Huangfu Yuchen asked expressionlessly.

“That’s right,” a middle-aged woman dressed as a martial artist spoke up. “Someone informed us that you and your wife arrived in Lanhai City, so we followed you here. Young Master Luo, do you have the Zhantian Vine?”

“Who informed you?” Huangfu Yuchen was interested in the “someone.”

The woman replied, “That’s none of your concern. Do you have the Zhantian Vine or not?”

Huangfu Yuchen evaded the question, looking at everyone present. “Are all of you here for the Zhantian Vine?”

“Not exactly.” A melodious voice rang out from the crowd.

The crowd made way, and a graceful woman dressed in white walked toward Huangfu Yuchen. Standing to her left was a man with a chilling and ghostly aura.

“The Luna Worshipping Sect’s Holy Maiden!”

The Holy Maiden Mingyue and the Luna Worshipping Sect’s Master, Yin Cha stopped before Huangfu Yuchen.

Yin Cha’s eyes locked onto Huangfu Yuchen, his pupils empty and seemingly lifeless, exuding an eerie chill that sent a shiver down one’s spine.

Mingyue’s countenance turned solemn and stern as she asked, “Young Master Luo, someone informed us that you took away a sacrificial item from our Luna Worshipping Sect ritual in Fancheng. Is it true or not?”

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As more and more people gathered, Huangfu Yuchen disappeared like a wisp of white smoke, flying towards the outskirts of the city.

“If you want to know the answer, keep up with me.”

“Trying to escape? It won’t be that easy!”

“Chase him!”

“Quick, don’t let him get away!”

Huangfu Yuchen’s figure soon vanished from everyone’s sight. The onlookers were amazed by his lightness skill and chased after him. Finally, in a forest on the outskirts, about ten miles away, they saw Huangfu Yuchen calmly standing under a pine tree. It was evident that he was waiting for them and had no intention of fleeing.

“You’ve got guts, kid,” someone challenged him with resentment.

The crowd surrounded Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen’s gaze swept across the faces of everyone present, wondering if the person who caused Yan Jin’s unconsciousness was among them. If it was indeed someone’s doing, what was their motive? Could it be for Yan Ge? No, besides Yan Jin, Yan Ge, and himself, no one else in this world knew about the connection between Yan Jin and Yan Ge. If the person’s target wasn’t Yan Ge, what could their motive be? It was all like a fog, and Huangfu Yuchen could only peel away the layers one by one.

“It seems that each of you has something to discuss with me. I can answer your questions, but before that, you must answer a few questions for me.

Otherwise, taking the Zhantian Vine from my hands won't be so easy. You all just witnessed my lightness skill. Is there anyone who believes they can catch up with me?" Huangfu Yuchen said calmly, his composure giving him the upper hand in this confrontation.

The crowd exchanged glances, but they had no choice but to comply.

"Ask your questions."

"First, tell me who informed you about my whereabouts."

The crowd started talking all at once, but their answers were similar: the Centipede Organization.

The Holy Maiden Mingyue nodded in agreement. "That's correct. They call themselves the 'Centipede'."

Huangfu Yuchen continued, "Among you, who was present at Xiguan Pass the day before and on the day I took away the Zhantian Vine? Step forward."

"Why?" someone asked.

Huangfu Yuchen replied lightly, "Right now, I'm the one asking the questions, not you."

The person fell silent.

Everyone present was accustomed to the martial world and wasn't afraid of anyone in particular. Those who were at Xiguan Pass stepped forward, totaling over a hundred people. Li Po, Zhong Xie, Pei Jinde and his wife, the three elders of the Black Tiger Sect, and Yin Sha were among them. Other than them, Huangfu Yuchen didn't recognize or have any impression of the others.

Huangfu Yuchen examined each of them, but it was difficult to determine who was the most suspicious in Yan Jin's unconsciousness.

"Are all of you here for the Zhantian Vine?"

“Sorry, I’m just an escort passing by. I came to watch the excitement,” Zhong Xie said, quickly stepping aside as if he was afraid that Huangfu Yuchen would come after him.

Huang Shuya pulled Pei Jinde back and said, “We’re just here to join the fun and see the Zhantian Vine.”

“I am!” Elder Gray Eagle stepped forward proudly.

Huangfu Yuchen casually replied, “It’s not so easy to make me answer questions. Defeat me first, then we’ll talk.”

Elder Black Tiger said, “Are you stalling for time? Can you inform us where Madam Luo is?”

Huangfu Yuchen calmly said, “Are you afraid of losing?”

“Fine!” Black Tiger Elder sneered, “However, it is widely known that the three of us brothers never distinguish between you and me, always acting together.”

For a moment, Huangfu Yuchen’s thoughts drifted. If his beloved were here, he would surely make fun of them, saying they even approached marriage together.

Yin Sha signaled to Holy Maiden Mingyue.

“Hold on,” Holy Maiden Mingyue spoke up to stop them.

Everyone turned to look at her.

Mingyue said, “Our leader is not here to deal with the Zhantian Vine, but rather to seek an explanation from Young Master Luo for taking away the sacrificial offering that day.”

Among everyone, Huangfu Yuchen found Yin Sha the most suspicious. They were able to use the mysterious gem to worship the moon, perhaps they had other secretive means. He maintained a calm demeanor and raised

his hand, saying, “The same goes for me. Defeat me, then I will ask questions.”

Yin Sha took two steps forward.

Rumors said that the leader of the Luna Worshipping Sect was ruthless and merciless. If he killed Luo Fang first, where would they find the Zhantian Vine?

Elder Black Tiger blocked Yin Sha’s path and spoke with a heavy tone, “Respected Master of the Luna Worshipping Sect, everything should be done in order—”

Before he could finish his sentence, Yin Sha’s gray pupils suddenly turned black, and his sharp gaze pierced into his eyes like two black thorns.

Elder Black Tiger sneered and without turning his head, he gestured to the toher two elders. The three of them surrounded Yin Sha.

“I’ve heard that the leader of the Luna Worshipping Sect possesses extraordinary and mysterious martial arts skills. Today, it’s a rare opportunity, and I should take the chance to learn from you,” Elder Gray Eagle chuckled.

Yin Sha spoke for the first time, his voice deep and hollow, filled with chilling Yin energy, as if it came from the underworld, “Those who block my path shall die.”

Elder Black Tiger paid no attention and shouted, “Attack!”

The three of them launched an assault on Yin Sha together.

The higher someone’s martial arts skill, the more likely they posed a threat. Huangfu Yuchen approached a chubby man and asked, “Do you know the top five martial artists among everyone present here?”

The man glanced at him lightly and looked elsewhere, saying, “Why should I tell you?”

Huangfu Yuchen took out a golden card from his sleeve pocket and handed it to him.

The man caught a glimpse of the words “Liuxuan Pavilion” on the card, and his face twitched with excitement. He reached out to take it but hesitated, looking at Huangfu Yuchen suspiciously, “Wait a minute. How do you know I would want this?”

Huangfu Yuchen’s gaze glanced at the man’s belly and then at a fishbone stuck on his collar. His slender finger pointed at the cloth bag hanging diagonally from the man’s shoulder, from which a faint aroma of roasted chicken emanated. All these signs proved that this man loved food.

“Well, how can you be certain that I know who among everyone here ranks in the top five in martial arts?” the man asked again.

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “When you appeared earlier, many people greeted you, indicating that you have considerable prestige in the martial world.”

Zhong Xie, who had come over at some point, looked at the golden card with envy. “This is ‘Food God’ Xu Yingchu, a senior. Most of us wandering the martial world are poor, and our wealth is not enough to afford three meals at Liuxian Pavilion. I heard that the gold card from Liuxian Residence not only offers a twenty percent discount but also provides first-class service. In the capital, it represents wealth and status. Having money and power is not enough; this card proves that you are a true noble. Young Master Luo, why didn’t you ask me? I know too.”

Food God was afraid that Huangfu Yuchen would change his mind, so he snatched the gold card from Huangfu Yuchen and tucked it into the chest of his robe. He pressed it down and said, “I do know the answer to your question. However, in the past year, I have rarely moved in the martial world. If I am mistaken, my friends, please do not take offense.”

With that, he bowed to the people around him, wearing a friendly smile.

Then, he turned to Huangfu Yuchen and said, “The first one is undoubtedly Senior Ying, the venerable elder.”

Huangfu Yuchen glanced behind him and only then did he notice that Elder Yingzun had quietly appeared, standing quietly outside the crowd.

His heart couldn't help but skip a beat. If suspicion was the criterion, Elder Yingzun was no exception. Martial arts aside, Elder Yingzun was already 150 years old and had insights beyond ordinary people. Perhaps he knew some special techniques as well.

Elder Yingzun walked slowly, his robe fluttering gently in the wind. With a smile, he said, "Young Master Luo, we meet again."

Huangfu Yuchen paused for a moment, cupped his hands, and said, "My son has fallen ill. I presumptuously ask, does Elder Yingzun know the reason?"

Elder Yingzun shook his head, his expression calm, his gaze distant. "Slaves have only one son, and the Huai River is dry. A bird falsely flies to the sky, while a turtledove sends itself away. Trimming an inch off the shadow, only emptiness remains. I advise you not to overthink, for fear of losing control."

Zhong Xie and Food God looked at each other, bewildered.

However, Huangfu Yuchen was secretly taken aback, his eyes filled with determination. 'One son' means without daughters, and the character 'nu' in 'nu' zi is replaced with 'you.' The character 'huai' without water becomes 'zhui,' and adding 'zhui' to 'you' becomes 'nan.' Removing the bird from the character 'ji' and replacing 'qiexiangsong' in 'sui' with 'zhui' also becomes 'nan.' Trimming the 'cun' from the character 'dui' becomes 'you,' and 'wuyan' means 'no mouth,' so removing 'kou' from the character 'wei' also becomes 'nan.'

'Xin you yu' means 'insufficient strength,' so removing 'li' from the character 'quan' becomes 'you,' and the character 'tui' meaning 'lose control' is also 'zhui.' The four lines of poetry contain four 'nan,' clearly indicating that great difficulties are about to arise, and he intentionally came here to offer assistance.

“Thank you,” Huangfu Yuchen bowed again, clasping his hands. “I have misunderstood your noble intentions.”

“Young Master Luo, there’s no need for such formalities,” Elder Yingzun responded, stroking his beard with a gentle smile. He exuded an air of magnanimity and tolerance.

Food God held the golden card against his chest. “Well, Young Master Luo, do you still want to know who the other four individuals are?”

“Please, go ahead,” Huangfu Yuchen raised his hand.

Some martial artists from the martial world were drawn to the conversation, diverting their attention from the intense battle between the other four individuals, gathering around them.

Food God said, “The second one is likely the leader of the Luna Worshipping Sect.”

Some people expressed doubts, “The leader of the Luna Worshipping Sect is indeed mysterious, but he rarely engages in physical combat. How can you know the extent of his martial arts prowess without witnessing it firsthand?”

Food God chuckled, “Although I haven’t seen it myself, we can see it now, can’t we? The Elders of the Black Tiger sect were once formidable opponents who challenged the three great masters of Great Han. They have been fighting for at least two hundred moves, yet the outcome is still undecided. Doesn’t that prove the high level of his martial arts? Furthermore, everyone knows about the Jade Hall’s domination of the martial world ten years ago. The leader of the Luna Worshipping Sect single-handedly defeated over twenty experts from the Jade Hall, although we still don’t know the reason behind it. However, the Luna Worshipping Sect does not deny this fact. Isn’t that evidence enough?”

The crowd nodded in agreement.

“That’s a reasonable argument, indeed…”

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“What about the third one?” someone else asked. “If you don’t reveal everything today, we won’t spare you!”

“Yes,” the crowd crossed their arms and stared at the Food God, clearly unfriendly. They were ready to gang up on him if any of his words failed to convince them.

“Well…” The Food God hesitated, glancing around and shifting his gaze. “Well…”

“Speak up,” the crowd urged.

The Food God said, “I’m really uncertain about the third one, but…” He glanced subtly at Huangfu Yuchen.

Some keen individuals immediately noticed his subtle movement and exclaimed, “Could it be Luo Fang?”

Huangfu Yuchen spared a glance at the intense battle between the other four and spoke calmly, “My wife and I are businesspeople, not martial artists.”

The crowd didn’t give up their verbal attack on the Food God because of his words.

“You have to explain who the third one is! Are Luo Fang and his wife considered part of the top masters? They’re just newcomers to the martial world, having entered only a couple of months ago!”

The food God sneered, “As you all know, Luo Fang and his wife had a fierce battle with lightening and the Zhantian Vine at Thunder Valley. Tell me, if it were you, would you dare to face such formidable lightning?”

The crowd still wanted to argue with him, but Huangfu Yuchen cast a cold gaze to stop them. His domineering aura was evident as he addressed the Food God, “Aside from my wife and me, who could be the third?”

The Food God looked at a righteous middle-aged man beside him and said, “This is Wan Junshan, the leader of the Flying Sword Sect. The Flying Sword Sect is the foremost righteous sect among the Ten Great Martial Arts Sects. Master Wan is upright and highly skilled. Even I, the Food God, willingly address him as ‘elder brother.’” He then respectfully saluted Wan Junshan.

Wan Junshan repeatedly waved his hand modestly and said humbly, “Master Xu, you overpraise. I dare not accept it.”

This time, the other martial artists surprisingly had no objections, indicating that Wan Junshan’s reputation in the martial world was indeed quite good.

“As for the fourth,” the Food God rubbed his chin and looked at the three individuals engaged in a fierce battle, “although I don’t want to admit it, it probably belongs to these three Black Tiger Elders.”

“Hmph,” Huang Shuya said disdainfully, “Those three old men are only worth one person. Ranking them fourth is giving them face.”

“Exactly,” another person said proudly, “Most of us here could defeat them in a one-on-one fight!”

“What about the fifth?” someone urged.

The Food God looked at the solitary figure of an old woman in yellow standing under a tree. “The Palace Mistress of the Evil Falling Flower Palace, Tian Ruyi. In terms of martial arts, she may not necessarily rank fifth, but her skill in using hidden weapons is remarkable. Even I feel apprehensive every time I meet her.”

At this point, he lowered his voice. “Young Master Luo may not know, but Tian Ruyi is actually only in her thirties. Three years ago, she suddenly turned into a sixty-year-old woman overnight. Rumors in the martial world

say that she stole the ‘Poison Immortal’s’ man and was poisoned. She transformed from a beautiful woman into an old lady in a single night. What a pity…”

Before he could finish speaking, the Food God dodged aside. It turned out a silver needle flew past him and pinned onto a tree trunk, causing the lush green tree to wither instantly as if encountering winter.

“Hey, hey, I was complimenting you,” the Food God shouted at Tian Ruyi.

Tian Ruyi gave him a cold glance. “You can try complimenting a bit more.”

The Food God covered his mouth with his hand.

The top five rankings confirmed the suspicion that the leader of the Luna Worshipping Sect, Yin Sha, was the most suspicious. However, they hadn’t met the Luna Worshipping Sect at Xiguan Pass yet, so that couldn’t explain it.

Huangfu Yuchen’s heart sank, and he inadvertently caught sight of a familiar large green insect wriggling on a branch. A thought crossed his mind, and his gaze drifted to an inconspicuous young man directly below. He pushed aside several people with a palm and swiftly attacked the young man with his right palm.

“You are the leader of the ‘Centipede,’” Huangfu Yuchen said in a deep voice. “Since you’re here, why not leave your name.”

The young man was startled, clearly surprised, and managed to dodge his attack in time. Seeing the young man’s agile figure and light footsteps, it was evident he possessed extraordinary skills.

“It won’t hurt to tell you,” the young man said, “I am indeed the leader of the Centipede, Meng Xiaohun!”

Huangfu Yuchen’s eyes darkened as he swung a powerful and forceful palm. The palm wind whistled. It was as sharp as a blade, severing a nearby large tree, which crashed down with a thunderous noise.

Meng Xiaohun leaped up to avoid it once again.

Huangfu Yuchen had finally found the trace of the Centipede's leader, so he wouldn't let him escape. Regardless of the many ordinary martial artists present, he unleashed his true cultivation level, exuding a menacing killing intent. His speed was as fast as lightning, continuously thrusting towards Meng Xiaohun.

The killing Intent swept through like a stormy wave, spreading in all directions. The martial artists present were stunned by this shocking scene, retreating hastily towards a distance. Even Yin Sha and the three Black Tiger Elders, who were in the midst of battle, were astonished and ceased their actions, standing nearby to watch.

Meng Xiaohun muttered something under his breath, and a gust of wind suddenly rose in front of him, forming a transparent barrier. Behind the barrier, the wind was calm, like another tranquil world.

This was not something that simple inner strength could accomplish! Huangfu Yuchen suppressed his astonishment and said with a deep voice, "Why don't you fight back?"

"Now is not the time to deal with you," Meng Xiaohun said with a faint smile.

"Is that so?" Huangfu Yuchen immediately guessed that his current goal was Yan Ge and said coldly, "I'm afraid you'll never live to see that time!"

"Boom!" The powerful true qi transformed into countless tiny needles, shooting towards Meng Xiaohun.

Meng Xiaohun's expression changed slightly. He muttered once again, raised his right hand, and a stream of energy rose like a huge axe, tearing apart the true qi and splitting it into two, surging towards Huangfu Yuchen.

"Zirui!"

Yan Ge, who had been waiting in the inn and had not seen Huangfu Yuchen return, noticed the cautious expressions of Gao Feng and Jiang Gan. He knew something was wrong, so he quickly left Yan Jin in Gao Feng's care and rushed over. He arrived just in time to witness the battle between Huangfu Yuchen and Meng Xiaohun.

Yan Ge was secretly amazed by Meng Xiaohun's peculiar power. This world indeed had other mysterious powers besides him and Huangfu Yuchen, but he couldn't determine the exact nature of Meng Xiaohun's power at the moment.

"Baby, why did you come?"

Yan Ge drew his sword. "You promised not to hide anything from me. We'll settle the score later."

Huangfu Yuchen was helpless, but at this moment, he couldn't spare any more words. Meng Xiaohun's abilities might not necessarily be stronger than his, but he was extremely difficult to deal with.

Yan Ge raised his sword and attacked Meng Xiaohun. However, before he could get close, his whole body seemed to be struck by electricity. He suddenly lost his strength and experienced an intense pain in his chest. He couldn't help but cry out in pain and collapsed to the ground.

"Baby!" Huangfu Yuchen's face changed drastically!

Yan Ge covered his chest, struggled to lift his head, and stared at Meng Xiaohun in astonishment. Who was he? Why did he feel such discomfort when he approached him? For a moment, he even felt like he was going to die!

Upon seeing Yan Ge arrive, Meng Xiaohun's eyes flashed with wild joy. Although Yan Ge's reaction was somewhat strange, it didn't hinder him from taking action. He abandoned Huangfu Yuchen and swiftly rushed towards him, leaving a trail of afterimages in the air.

Huangfu Yuchen flashed in front of Yan Ge and thrust both palms forward, hitting Meng Xiaohun’s chest heavily.

Meng Xiaohun let out a muffled groan and fell to the ground.

Huangfu Yuchen quickly embraced Yan Ge in his arms, anxiously asking, “Baby, what’s wrong? Where does it hurt?”

“Zirui…” Yan Ge could only manage to say his name before another sharp pain struck his chest, causing him to uncontrollably spit out a mouthful of blood and faint.

“Baby!” Huangfu Yuchen was shocked. He suddenly turned his head and saw Meng Xiaohun charging towards them once again.

“Young Master Luo.” Elder Yingzun came over with a serious expression.

“Take care of him for me!”

“Don’t worry,” Elder Yingzun nodded solemnly.

Huangfu Yuchen stared at Meng Xiaohun as if he was staring at a dead man. “You… will die!”

Boom!

A majestic force erupted from his palms, creating a thunderous roar like a collapsing mountain and a tsunami, rushing fiercely towards Meng Xiaohun.

The onlookers were already stunned. Was this really caused by internal qi?

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Meng Xiaohun was horrified and quickly dodged, but he was still struck by the powerful force and fell to the ground. His back was severely injured, and flesh and blood mangled.

Enduring the pain, he quickly shouted before Huangfu Yuchen attacked again, “The Zhantian Vine is in his hands. Don’t you all want it?”

The three Black Tiger Elders exchanged a glance, their eyes filled with fanaticism. Luo Fang’s sudden incredible martial arts must be credited to the Zhantian Vine! Let’s give it a try!

Without exchanging words, the three of them rushed towards Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen sneered, extending his right hand and wielding his sword. After a cold light flashed through the air, the figures of the three Black Tiger Elders paused midway.

Ah!

Everyone gasped in horror, looking at the identical marks on the chests of the three elders. This was not caused by one sword, but by three. In the blink of an eye, Luo Fang unleashed three strikes. Just how high was his martial arts?

Elder Black Tiger and the others looked down in disbelief. They opened their mouths, but couldn’t say anything, and fell to the ground, lifeless. The vivid red blood quickly stained the green grass crimson.

“Protect your Master!” Meng Xiaohun’s face sank. At his shout, the subordinates hiding in the crowd all rushed toward Huangfu Yuchen.

Meanwhile, Meng Xiaohun’s lips moved rapidly, and at the same time, the crowd was amazed to find that the wound on his back was slowly healing.

———-

Elder Yin Yingzung supported Yan Ge with one hand while lifting the other. Two people flew out and crashed into a tree, their fate unknown.

Yin Sha’s stagnant eyes slightly turned, and he flew out, extinguishing three people with just one sword.

“You!” Meng Xiaohun stared at him with anger.

Yin Sha calmly said, “Until Young Master Luo explains to me, no one can act.”

Zhong Xie also drew his sword and killed one person, taking the initiative to explain, “Compared to you, I find Luo Fang more pleasing.”

Huangfu Yuchen was focused solely on killing Meng Xiaohun. His arms moved and he condensed true qi into dual swords, like a thunderbolt, he flew towards Meng Xiaohun and both swords struck simultaneously.

Meng Xiaohun:s arms were severed by Huangfu Yuchen, and he let out a miserable scream!

“You!” Meng Xiaohun was furious, and he spat out a silver needle straight at Huangfu Yuchen.

At such close proximity, it was difficult for Huangfu Yuchen to dodge the hidden weapon. In a critical moment, a thick “giant caterpillar” as thick as an arm pierced between them, and the silver needle pierced into the body of the Zhantian Vine. The tail of the Zhantian Vine swept heavily across Meng Xiaohun’s face.

A charred mark appeared on Meng Xiaohun’s face, and he let out a sharp, prolonged howl before suddenly transforming into a black mist and escaping hastily.

Huangfu Yuchen had the scene of Yan Ge spitting blood circling in his mind. He pursued with bloodshot eyes but was entangled.

The Zhantian Vine had wrapped itself around him.

“Release!” Huangfu Yuchen coldly warned.

“Young Master Luo, Madam Luo has awakened,” Elder Yingzun’s words echoed in the air.

Huangfu Yuchen’s heart trembled, and only then did he regain his composure. He leaped to Elder Yingzun’s side, tremblingly embracing Yan Ge in his arms. “Baby, are you alright?”

“Zirui, I’m fine,” Yan Ge held his hand, his expression inexplicable, and his tone strange. “Nothing happened at all.”

“Really?” Huangfu Yuchen scanned him up and down anxiously. “You were spitting blood and fainted just now.” He used his thumb to wipe away the bloodstain at the corner of Yan Ge’s mouth.

Yan Ge extended his hand, signaling him to check his pulse. “I’m really fine now.”

After Huangfu Yuchen checked his pulse, he finally relaxed. He hugged Yan Ge tightly and kissed him several times. “It’s good that you’re fine, it’s good…”

The others averted their eyes with embarrassment. It wasn’t uncommon for men to be married, but to be so intimate in front of everyone was truly rare.

Yan Ge tightened the grip on his hand. “And you? Are you injured?”

Huangfu Yuchen smirked, his gaze soothing and satisfied. “I’m not.”

“We should go back soon,” Yan Ge had a pressing question that needed to be resolved.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, took a few steps forward, and turned to look at the others.

Almost everyone couldn’t help but take a step back.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “I believe none of you are still thinking of taking the Zhantian Vine with you.”

No one uttered a word. After witnessing his martial arts, who would dare to confront him?

Huangfu Yuchen then looked at Yin Sha. “Thank you, Master Yin, for your help earlier. I will give you an explanation for the incident of disrupting the Moon Worship ceremony. However, not now. One month from now, meet me at the Liuxian Pavilion in the capital.”

Yin Sha nodded silently, and without saying a word, turned to leave with Mingyue.

Huangfu Yuchen also expressed his gratitude to Zhong Xie and gave him a golden card for Liuxian Pavilion. Finally, he approached Elder Yingzun, “Thank you, Elder Yingzun, for your assistance. However, I am curious, why did you help us?”

Elder Yingzun smiled lightly, calmly walked away, and recited, “Tides rise on the first day of the month, feathers of geese soar high. Despite various sounds that may arise, they fall on deaf ears.”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen exchanged a glance, astonishment evident in their eyes. This was another puzzle.

“Tides rise on the first day of the month, feathers of geese soar high” referred to the character “Han,” and “fall on deaf ears” referred to “long” without the “ear.” Elder Ying had already seen through Huangfu Yuchen’s identity, which was why he had assisted them several times.

They looked again, but Elder Yingzun had already vanished without a trace.

On the way back to the inn, Huangfu Yuchen explained to Yan Ge what had happened with Meng Xiaohun. Yan Ge seemed lost in thought.

When they reached the elegant courtyard of the inn, Yan Jin had already awakened. Jiang Gan, Zhang Taiyi, and a few others were trying to cheer him up. However, Yan Jin seemed distracted, glancing towards the entrance from time to time. When he saw Yan Ge, his eyes lit up. He jumped off the chair and ran over.

“Papa.”

Yan Ge walked over and held his hand. “Yan Jin, come inside with us.”

“Young Master, is something wrong with Madam?” Deng Mandi noticed the bloodstains on Yan Ge’s clothes and was greatly surprised, asking with concern.

Huangfu Yuchen waved his hand, indicating that he would explain later. He entered the room with Yan Ge and Yan Jin, closing the door behind them.

“Yan Jin, did you wake up about an incense stick ago?” Huangfu Yuchen asked.

Yan Jin nodded, glanced at him, and then looked at Yan Ge. “Papa, I have something important to tell you.”

Huangfu Yuchen knew that both Yan Ge and Yan Jin probably had some conclusions, so he didn’t ask much. “I’ll go and have them prepare food.” He closed the door as he left.

“Yan Jin, I encountered a man just now, and I felt extremely uncomfortable being near him, as if I was about to die. But as soon as he left, I immediately recovered, as if the discomfort I felt earlier was just an illusion. And you, you recovered almost at the same time as me. Do you know what this is about?”

Yan Jin patted his hand and sat down dejectedly on the chair. He sighed and said, “Master, it’s my fault. I was too presumptuous.”

“Your fault? Why?” Yan Ge was astonished. “What exactly happened?”

Yan Jin said, “Us systems, like humans, have similar laws and regulations. One space is not allowed to have two systems. I always thought that this space only had my system, but clearly, that’s not the case. There is another system present, and its current level is higher than mine, which is why it can restrain me. It’s my fault for forgetting that you crossed over and aren’t truly considered a person from this space. That’s why this space coincidentally spawned another system.”

“What?!” Yan Ge stood up in shock, wide-eyed. “Another system? Is it also the Male Consort Upgrade System?”

“No!” Yan Jin said, “And even if there was another Male Consort Upgrade System, it wouldn’t be in our Great Han Empire. Otherwise, we would have definitely noticed it earlier. So, I can be sure that this system is not the Male Consort Upgrade System but another type of system.”

Yan Ge felt slightly relieved but worried about another matter. “Are these two systems inherently incompatible?”

Yan Jin explained, “Because a space can only have one system, conflict is inevitable once a certain range is entered.”

“What should we do then?” Yan Ge frowned. “If we want to eliminate his suppression, we have to kill him. But we don’t even know where his lair is, and it’s not something we can do immediately. What if he approaches us again? Won’t it affect us?”

Yan Jin said, “You just need to level up immediately. Moreover, this kind of discomforting suppression won’t last long. When both your strength and his reach the upper-middle level, this suppression will completely disappear. It’s one of the characteristics and advantages of the system. By that time, unless he wants to oppose you personally, his system won’t have any impact on you and me.”

Yan Ge finally felt at ease. “I see.”

“Master, I’m sorry. I overlooked it earlier,” Yan Jin apologized.

“It’s not your fault.” Yan Ge patted his head gently. “If you hadn’t mentioned it, I would have almost forgotten that I crossed over.”

The two of them had a deep bond, and once they talked it out, they smiled at each other, feeling relieved.

“Let me call your father in. I don’t know if he’s really uninjured,” Yan Ge said to Yan Jin and then transmitted his voice to Huangfu Yuchen. “Yuchen, come in.”

“Coming.” Huangfu Yuchen appeared quickly. “What’s the situation?”

“We have found a solution,” Yan Ge looked at the bandaged half of his arm and squinted. “Hmm?”

Huangfu Yuchen forced a smile. “Just a minor injury.”

“Oh, come here. Let me bandage it for you.” Yan Ge smiled mischievously.

Huangfu Yuchen felt flustered under Yan Ge’s smiling gaze but approached cautiously. “Baby…”

Yan Ge pressed on his wound forcefully with his hand, innocently looking at him. “It’s just a minor injury. It definitely doesn’t hurt.”

Huangfu Yuchen looked at the cloth that had turned red again and smiled wryly. “It hurts a little…” From now on, he would never dare to hide anything from his beloved again!

Yan Jin chuckled mischievously.

— End of Volume 2 —

We have come to the end of Volume 2, yay! I plan to finish my other book (*Don't Try To Corrupt Me*) this week, so I will start Volume 3 (*Road To A Powerful Country*) next Monday. I'll also increase on the frequency of updates so, keep an eye out for the new schedule.

MCUS Chapter 121

Hope everyone had a nice weekend. We now start off on the Third Volume. It has the most chapters among all the five volumes btw. Updates will be from Monday to Wednesday.

From the carriage window, Yan Ge saw the tall city wall and the mighty characters “Great Han” above the city gate. He stretched his arm out and smiled at Huangfu Yuchen. “Finally, we’re home.”

A hint of a smile appeared in Huangfu Yuchen’s eyes. The word “home” warmed his heart. He reached out and pulled Yan Ge’s arm back from outside the window. “Be careful not to catch a cold.”

It was drizzling outside. The rain had been falling for two days and only subsided as they approached the capital.

“It’s alright. The sun will come out soon,” Yan Ge glanced at the sky. Due to the rain, the sun appeared hazy, but it was foreseeable that the weather would clear up soon.

The carriage slowly entered the city gate, and a street vendor holding an umbrella ran over. “Do the distinguished guests want a beautiful map of the capital? I can offer a special price to the young masters!”

Gao Feng chuckled and said, “Thank you. We are residents of the capital.”

The vendor smiled and returned to his stall.

Huangfu Yuchen hooked his lips and asked, “Do you feel a sense of accomplishment?”

“Indeed,” Yan Ge pulled back the corner of the carriage curtain and saw Yan Xiaojing walking on the street with his hands behind his back, nodding to the commoners who greeted him.

“Father! Father…” he called softly.

Yan Xiaojing thought he must be hallucinating, otherwise how could he hear his son’s voice? He looked around and caught a glimpse of a smiling face peeking out from the corner of a carriage window. A barely noticeable joy flickered across his face and he walked over, intending to have a quiet conversation with Yan Ge. But when he saw Huangfu Yuchen next to Yan Ge, he glared at Yan Ge, blaming him for recklessly greeting him and causing him to neither salute nor not acknowledge His Majesty.

Yan Ge looked innocent. What’s wrong? Can’t I say hello to my father on the street?

Huangfu Yuchen smiled gently. “Master Yan, there’s no need to make it difficult for Yan Guiren. We will go back to the palace first, and he will come to your residence later.”

“Yes, your Majesty,” Yan Xiaojing agreed and discreetly retreated, so as not to draw attention to the unusual carriage. Emperors of every dynasty may encounter assassins, so it was better to be cautious.

“Was that intentional?” Huangfu Yuchen looked at Yan Ge with amusement.

Yan Ge laughed. “Don’t you think it’s amusing to see my father, who is usually so imposing, acting flustered?”

Huangfu Yuchen shook his head helplessly. Yan Ge dared to tease anyone.

Jun Xiang returned to the palace ahead of them and instructed the eunuchs to prepare hot water, hot meals, and so on.

The carriage directly entered the palace gate and returned to Tenglong Palace. Yan Ge headed straight for the spacious dragon bed, kicked off his shoes, and rolled on it with nostalgia.

Huangfu Yuchen's heart started racing. He walked over and sat on the edge of the bed, gazing at Yan Ge with a smile. He murmured with a hint of ambiguity, "Baby, if you keep doing that, I'll really think you're seducing me."

"You're being narcissistic," Yan Ge lay back on the bed, raised his foot and kicked his thigh. "I just feel that during these months outside, there was no bed more comfortable than this one. That's all."

Huangfu Yuchen lowered his head and pecked his lips. "Alright, it's my narcissism then. You can lie down for a while, and we can take a bath later."

"Mmm," Yan Ge closed his eyes to rest.

"Your Majesty, I'm going to see the young prince," Yan Jin said. He was holding his little bag, eager to deliver the gift he bought for the young prince.

"Alright."

Huangfu Yuchen walked to a corner and called for the shadow guards, whispering in a low voice, "Immediately dispatch all available undercover agents to gather information on a person named Meng Xiaohun, the leader of Centipede. His appearance is uncertain, perhaps he can change his appearance, and his name may not be real. But it's evident that he lost both arms about a month ago. If you find him, execute him without mercy."

"Yes!"

"Also, gather information on a woman, the vice leader of Centipede. She was disfigured a few months ago. You have the same instructions, execute

her without mercy."

"Yes!"

After giving these orders, Huangfu Yuchen walked to the table and sat down, asking Xiao Changzi, "Has anything happened in the palace during this time?"

Xiao Changzi was Deng Mande's apprentice. He was trained by him, so although he still lacked experience, he often worked with Deng Mande so he was familiar with everything in the palace. In Deng Mande's absence, he and the Deputy Chief of the Department of Internal Affairs managed the inner court.

"Your Majesty, the Empress has managed the harem very well, and there haven't been any major incidents. However, something happened to Prince Dai recently," Xiao Changzi said.

"What?" Huangfu Yuchen was surprised. "What happened to Prince Dai?"

Yan Ge, who was listening on the bed, also felt surprised and sat up.

"Recently, Prince Dai went hunting in the mountains with his men and accidentally fell off a cliff. Few people go to that mountain, the forest is dense and full of thorns. The officials and soldiers searched for him on the cliff for seven or eight days before finding him. Prince Dai's life is not in danger, but he injured his left arm when he fell off the mountain. Due to delayed treatment, the imperial physicians said that Prince Dai's arm…" Xiao Changzi suddenly knelt on the ground, bowing his head so low that it almost touched the ground, unable to continue speaking.

"Why didn't we know about this?" Huangfu Yuchen slammed the table in anger.

Xiao Changzi hurriedly said, "The servants intended to report this to Your Majesty, but Prince Dai said that Your Majesty was already busy with the Southern Inspection and didn't want to trouble you even more by letting us

inform you. He firmly refused to let us tell you. Please forgive us, Your Majesty!”

Yan Ge walked to Huangfu Yuchen’s side and hugged his shoulders. “Yuchen, getting angry won’t help. Let’s go and see together.”

Deng Mande also advised, “Yes, Your Majesty, don’t worry for now. Yan Guiren has excellent medical skills and may have a solution.”

“We’ve been on the road for the past few days, and you’re tired too. Stay in the palace and rest.” Huangfu said as he calmed down. “It’s been a while, and there’s no rush for this day. I’ll go and see what’s going on, and we’ll talk later.”

“Alright,” Yan Ge nodded.

“You don’t have to wait for me to have dinner,” Without even changing his clothes, Huangfu Yuchen hurriedly left the palace. Yan Ge took a bath and changed into fresh clothes, and the imperial kitchen sent over the meal.

Two people entered the hall.

“We pay our respects to the young master!” Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi entered, walking briskly, and knelt before Yan Ge.

“Why have you returned?” Yan Ge was delighted to see them. “Get up.”

Xiao Chuanzi said, “Ever since the young master left the palace, we have been very worried about you. As soon as we heard the news, we dropped everything and rushed over. Please forgive us, young master.”

Yan Ge smiled and said, “There’s no need for forgiveness. Get up quickly.”

“Young master, I can see that you have lost a lot of weight,” Wan Xiang’s eyes reddened.

“How could that be?” Yan Ge asked. He asked Xiao Changzi to open the large boxes on the side. “These are the gifts I brought back. Choose what you like first, pick two each.”

“Thank you, young master!”

Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi’s worries subsided. They each chose two gifts and stood aside, waiting to serve Yan Ge’s meal.

“How is everything going with the company?” Yan Ge asked.

“Don’t worry, young master. Everything is going smoothly. We have received the letters you wrote to us, and we are following your instructions from before you left,” Wan Xiang replied.

“Good,” Yan Ge expressed satisfaction. “Reward all the managers and supervisors generously.”

Upon receiving his praise, Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi were very happy.

“Thank you, young master!”

“Has Fei Yun arrived?” Yan Ge asked again. Before leaving Lujiang County, he had left the address of the medicine shop where Fei Yun worked and sent a letter to the capital for someone to pick him up.

“He arrived seven or eight days ago. Manager Wei found him clever, so he temporarily arranged for him to help out at the winery. He learns quickly,” Wan Xiang replied.

“Very good,” Yan Ge said.

Xiao Chuanzi said, “Young master, there was an incident recently. Prince Dai…”

Yan Ge waved his hand and interrupted, “I already know about that. Wan Xiang, go to the storeroom later and see if there are any suitable gifts to send to Prince Dai.”

“Yes.”

Meanwhile, Huangfu Yuchen had arrived at Prince Dai’s residence. He stopped the person who was about to report and went directly to the main

courtyard where Huangfu Yuhu resided. From afar, he saw Huangfu Yuhu sitting in the corridor, staring blankly at the raindrops falling from the eaves, his left arm hanging weakly. Huangfu Yuchen paused in his footsteps.

“Has he been like this recently?”

Princess Dai spoke softly with a worried expression, “To the emperor’s inquiry, yes.”

“Leave us,” Huangfu Yuchen instructed. He had his attendants stay in place and walked over alone.

“Didn’t this king say he didn’t want to see anyone?” Huangfu Yuhu didn’t even turn his head, speaking gloomily.

“Do We count as ‘anyone’?” Huangfu Yuchen asked.

Huangfu Yuhu was taken aback and turned his head with surprise. “Brother Emperor? You’re back?”

Huangfu Yuchen could tell that he was forcing a smile. He walked over and reached out his hand towards Huangfu Yuhu’s left arm.

Huangfu Yuhu sidestepped, avoiding his hand.

Huangfu Yuchen tapped his brothers forehead with a loud smack. “I am your brother!”

“If you are my brother, shouldn’t you show concern for me instead of hitting me when I’m injured?” Huangfu Yuhu muttered, no longer evading.

Huangfu Yuchen grabbed his sleeve and saw several visible scars on his arm caused by thorns. He frowned and gently pinched his arm.

Huangfu Yuhu smiled bitterly. “Brother Emperor, there’s no need to try anymore. The royal physicians have said…”

He couldn’t continue his words.

Huangfu Yuchen let go of his sleeve. “Never mind what they say. I’ll have Xiao Ge come and examine you. Perhaps he has a solution.”

“Perhaps,” Huangfu Yuhu shook his head resolutely. “No need. Even if I consider myself strong enough, I don’t want to be filled with hope only to be disappointed again and again.”

“Yuhu!” Huangfu Yuchen looked at him disapprovingly.

Huangfu Yuhu interrupted his words. “Brother Emperor!”

Huangfu Yuchen thought that Yan Ge might not have a real solution, so he decided he’ll first talk to him before saying anything further. He stopped questioning Huangfu Yuhu and patted his shoulder. “Alright, I won’t force you. But you must promise me to stay strong. We can only think positively for now. At least your right hand is still intact, capable of holding a brush and a sword.”

Huangfu Yuhu nodded. “That’s what I’m thinking too. Let’s not talk about this anymore, Brother Emperor. Has everything gone smoothly this time?”

“Very smoothly,” Huangfu Yuchen replied.

“Anything interesting happen?” Huangfu Yuhu asked curiously.

“There is,” Huangfu Yuchen said. “There was this one time when Xiao Ge…”

Princess Dai saw the two brothers talking and laughing from a distance and was relieved. She instructed the maidservant, “Go prepare the meal.”

“Yes.”

MCUS Chapter 122

In the Yongyi Palace, the young crown prince was delighted with the various gifts and snacks Yan Jin brought him, and was smiling from ear to ear. He eagerly pulled the empress from time to time and exclaimed cheerfully.

“Brother Jin, how do you play with this?” The young crown prince held a spinning top and asked Yan Jin curiously.

Yan Jin replied, “Let me show you.”

The senior palace maid, Chunhui, watched the two children with a contented expression. She whispered to the empress, “Empress, Prince Jin has brought gifts for the crown prince from all the places he visited. You can rest assured now.”

The empress nodded and let out a sigh of relief. She softly said, “As long as Xi’er is well, I am content. I have completely let go. However, it’s not the same for others in the palace.”

Huangfu Yuchen returned to the Tenglong Palace before the palace gates were closed. He frowned as he looked at the untouched meal on the table and walked over to Yan Ge, who was busy writing. He snatched the pen from his hand, and said, “Didn’t I tell you not to wait for me to eat?”

Yan Ge replied, “You’re back? I am not hungry yet. I just waited for you as a matter of course.”

“Stubborn,” Huangfu Yuchen instructed Deng Mande, “Heat up the food.”

“Yes.”

“How is Prince Dai’s injury?” Yan Ge asked with concern.

Huangfu Yuchen described Prince Dai’s symptoms. “Baby, can you treat him?”

Yan Ge said, “Based on what you’ve said, Prince Dai’s left arm has completely lost sensation from the shoulder, indicating that the bones, joints, and meridians have completely necrotized. Even I am powerless to reverse it. Perhaps I should personally go and take a look tomorrow?”

“Forget it,” Huangfu Yuchen sighed lightly, shaking his head. “Yuhu has always been proud, and this incident has dealt a significant blow to him. He said that he doesn’t want to see anyone other than me until he adjusts his mindset completely. Since there is little hope, we can only resign ourselves to the situation.”

Yan Ge didn’t insist either. “Then I’ll have someone deliver the gifts to him to avoid any disrespect.”

“Okay.” Huangfu Yuchen saw the palace maids from the dining hall arrive and pulled him up. “Let’s eat.”

Yan Ge had just taken a few bites when he remembered something. He pointed to a box on the table and said, “Eunuch Deng, please.”

Deng Mande picked up the box and handed it to Yan Ge, who then passed it to Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen opened the box, revealing a stack of silver notes.

“200,000 taels,” Yan Ge emphasized.

Huangfu Yuchen laughed. “I will issue the decree tomorrow morning. Can we eat in peace now?”

Yan Ge nodded and leaned over, leaving an oily kiss on his face.

When the imperial procession returned from the southern expedition, the civil and military officials had heard to some extent about the several local

officials that Huangfu Yuchen had dealt with during the journey.

The morning of the following day was the first imperial court session since the emperor's return to the palace. The officials made extra efforts to present themselves neatly, and their spirits were impeccable.

Huangfu Yuhu also attended the court session, and it seemed that the comfort from his elder brother had alleviated his condition to a great extent.

"If you have matters to be reported, remain in court; if there isn't, leave." Xiao Changzi shouted. Deng Mande had been working hard all this way, so Huangfu Yuchen gave him two days off.

Jiang Gan stepped forward. "I have something to report."

"Speak."

Jiang Gan said, "During this southern expedition, we first arrived at Shuangque County, where the county magistrate, Shen Jinzhong, was found guilty of corruption, bribery, and oppressing the people… The city governor of Fancheng, Magistrate Mei, showed concern for the people and deserves commendation… The magistrate of Bazu County… should be punished for severe crimes."

The officials thought to themselves that the emperor had indeed visited several places this time, and they became even more cautious, secretly trying to recall whether they had violated any laws or regulations.

"Approved," Huangfu Yuchen said, and then continued: "The crimes committed by Shen Jinzhong, the former county magistrate of Shuangque County, are too numerous to record. Execute him publicly as a warning to others, and announce it throughout the country as a deterrent!"

"Yes!"

"Promote Magistrate Mei, the city governor of Fancheng, to the rank of 'Third-rank Imperial Censor.' Any memorial from him can be presented directly to me," Huangfu Yuchen continued.

“Yes!”

Huangfu Yuchen cast a cold gaze below, his warning words resounding like thunder, “When governing the country, rewards shall be given for merit and punishments shall be imposed for crimes!”

The officials kneelt down In unison, calling out, “Long live His Majesty! May His Majesty reign for thousands of years!”

“You may rise.” Huangfu Yuchen raised his hand.

Jiang Gan said, “Your Majesty, there is one more matter. During this southern expedition, Yan Guiren first assisted us in suppressing bandits, then resolved the issues in the Xiguan Pass and the abandoned city. Furthermore, he invented the pulley system and soap, which benefit the people. I believe Yan Guiren’s contributions should be announced to the world.”

Yan Xiaojing maintained a neutral expression, but everyone could see the smile in his eyes. They were both envious and jealous. Why couldn’t they have such a talented son?

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, “Official Jiang’s words are reasonable. I already instructed the Historian to compile a separate record, specifically documenting Yan Guiren’s achievements. First, it will let the world know about Yan Guiren’s contributions to our Great Han Kingdom, and secondly, it will inspire students across the nation to pursue knowledge and progress. What do you think, esteemed ministers?”

As long as it didn’t involve granting nobility or participating in political affairs, the ministers agreed and felt fortunate that Yan Guiren belonged to their kingdom. Moreover, Yan Guiren’s contributions were undeniable.

“If there are no other matters, you may leave. Prime Minister Wen, Prime Minister Wu, Grand Tutor Song, the Imperial Historian, and Grand Tutor You shall remain.”

“We bid farewell to Your Majesty—”

Huangfu Yuchen and the others moved to the Imperial Study.

“Provide seats and serve tea to the esteemed officials.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty!”

“Has Grand Tutor Song’s illness improved?” Huangfu Yuchen glanced at Song Chaobang, who appeared slightly more dispirited than before. The matter of sending him back to the capital had dealt him quite a blow.

Song Chaobang’s cloudy eyes suddenly lit up. “Thank you, Your Majesty, for your concern. Your loyal subject is completely fine now and will continue to serve you wholeheartedly!”

Seeing his genuine remorse, Huangfu Yuchen nodded.

“I have kept you here this time because I have a matter to discuss. I intend to dismiss the consorts in the harem who have never served.”

Jiang Gan and the others were somewhat surprised.

Huangfu Yuchen continued, “If I’m not mistaken, two of them are Grand Tutor You’s granddaughter and the Prime Minister Wu’s cousin. I don’t want to hurt the hearts of the esteemed ministers, nor do I want to continue delaying the youth of these two young ladies. I wonder if you esteemed ministers have any good suggestions?”

Even if Huangfu Yuchen sought their opinions, they knew he had already made up his mind. Everyone exchanged glances.

Grand Tutor You hesitated, “Your Majesty, the young consorts have already entered the palace and belong to Your Majesty. If they are dismissed from the palace, I’m afraid…”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Naturally, I won’t force them to leave the palace, but they must be clear about one thing— I have not favored them in the past, and I will not favor them in the future. Even if they remain in the palace, they will live in loneliness. If they are willing to leave the palace, I will grant them honorary titles as compensation and even assist them in

finding suitable marriages.” This was something he had considered for a long time and it was time to act on it.

Prime Minister Wu didn’t understand, “May I ask how Your Majesty plans to assist them in finding suitable marriages?”

Huangfu Yuchen smiled lightly, “Our Great Han Kingdom has no shortage of unmarried outstanding young men. In a few days, the Spring Examinations will take place. I will take advantage of the Qionglin Banquet to hold a grand feast in the palace, where you esteemed ministers can bring unmarried young men who have yet to find matches. If they find someone they like, we can act as matchmakers.” As he said this, he felt somewhat helpless. It was uncomfortable for a respectable Emperor to play the role of a matchmaker, but for the sake of his beloved, he had to steel himself. Yan Ge didn’t know about this matter yet. He wondered if they would be happy or tease him upon finding out.

The ministers pondered and weighed their options. After a while, Song Chaobang said, “The Great Han Kingdom has a long-standing tradition of the Hundred Flowers Festival. Holding a ‘Hundred Flowers Festival’ in the palace wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

Grand Tutor You and Prime Minister Wu exchanged a glance and nodded. They were already in high positions and didn’t need to rely on their granddaughter or cousin to climb up the ranks. Their happiness was more important to them.

“We have no objections. Your Majesty, please decide.”

Huangfu Yuchen showed a satisfied expression. “Very well, then this matter is settled. As for the Spring Examinations, you esteemed officials should assist the Minister of Personnel.”

“We obey the order. Your Majesty, please rest assured.”

After Jiang Gan and the others left, Huangfu Yuchen instructed Xiao Changzi, “Issue the decree.”

“Yes.”

———

Yan Ge sat in the carriage, heading towards the Yan Mansion at a leisurely pace.

“There are many scholars in the capital.”

Wan Xiang said, “In another five or six days, it will be the Spring Examinations. Scholars from various regions will arrive in the capital in advance to avoid missing the exams due to unexpected delays. Most of them will even come a month in advance.”

“Yes, I almost forgot,” Yan Ge said, “Instruct them that students who purchase any products sold under the name of the First Company can enjoy a 30% discount.”

“Yes,” Wan Xiang acknowledged.

Xiao Chanzai suggested, “Young Master, how about setting rewards for the top ten scholars in advance? It might motivate their morale.”

Yan Ge waved his hand, “No, that’s something the Emperor should do. Yuchen won’t mind if I steal his limelight, but we also need to consider the thoughts of the officials and the common people. We can’t let them think that I’m overshadowing him. Instead, we will announce the 30% discount in the Emperor’s name. After all, the company is an imperial enterprise, so it’s perfectly reasonable.”

Xiao Chanzai nodded repeatedly, “Young Master, you have considered everything thoroughly.”

At that moment, Yan Ge suddenly heard a notification from the system:

–“Ding. Congratulations on successfully completing Main Mission 8 – Being promoted to Shiqing by the Emperor. Mission reward: 10,000 taels of silver, ‘Fengyun Immortal Records’ up to the Early Golden Core stage. Main Mission 9 – Being promoted to Caiqing by the Emperor. Mission

rewards: 50,000 taels of silver and ‘Fengyun Immortal Records’ upto the Late Golden Core stage. To accept the mission, select ‘Yes’, to decline the mission, select ‘No’.”

*Ranks — Daying, Changzai, Shirén (scholar), Cairen, Guiren, Shiqing (talented scholar), Caiqing (honorable official), Guiqing(Noble Consort), to Huang Guiqing (Imperial Noble Consort)

Yan Ge just selected “Yes,” and the prompt rang out again:

–“Ding. Congratulations on successfully completing Main Mission 9 – Being promoted to Caiqing by the Emperor. Mission reward: 50,000 taels of silver and the ‘Fengyun Immortal Records’ up to the Late Golden Core stage. Main Mission 10 – Being promoted to Guiqing by the Emperor. Mission rewards upon completion: 100,000 taels of silver, ‘Fengyun Immortal Records’ up to the Mid Nascent stage. Punishment for mission failure: 100,000 taels of silver will be deducted. To accept the mission, select ‘Yes’, to decline the mission, select ‘No’.”

Yan Ge’s eyebrows rose in pleasant surprise. Huangfu Yuchen must have directly promoted him to “Caiqing.”

He happily selected “Yes,” and the system prompt rang out for the third time;

–“Ding! Side Mission – Sending Du Changzai to the cold palace is complete. Rewards: 400 taels of silver, one silver chest. Would you like to open the silver chest now?”

Yan Ge almost burst into laughter. Huangfu Yuchen had sent Du Zhengfeng to the cold palace? Du Zhengfeng must have used this opportunity to return to the position of a Shadow Guard. Although he wouldn't actually be in the cold palace, with the imperial edict in place, the mission was considered successful.

"Young Master, is there something wrong?" Wan Xiang looked at Yan Ge with confusion.

"Nothing. I'm just thinking about meeting my parents soon, so I'm happy." Yan Ge temporarily stored the silver chest in his backpack.

Wan Xiang hesitated for a moment, "Young Master, there's something… I don't know if I should mention it now…"

"What is it?" Yan Ge raised his eyebrows, "Don't you know my temperament? Just speak up if there's something."

Wan Xiang said, "It's about Young Master Yan Su. About a month ago, Young Master Yan Su divorced his wife."

Yan Ge widened his eyes, "Divorced? Did my elder brother initiate it, or did his wife initiate it?"

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Wan Xiang said, “I heard it was Young Master Yan Su’s idea.”

“What exactly happened?” Yan Ge asked, “Tell me in detail.”

“When you were away, I went to see Madam Yan a few times. One time, she was in a terrible mood, so we chatted for a while, and that’s when I found out what happened— Lady Ruan is really clueless,” Wan Xiang said, getting angrier as she spoke, “Young Master Yan deeply loves her, but she insists on him marrying her cousin. Young Master Yan disagreed, and they argued about it several times. She pushed him too far, and he decided to divorce her. Only then did Lady Ruan regret it and said she didn’t need him to marry her cousin. Young Master Yan was already heartbroken and insisted on the divorce. It was only when he offered to give Lady Ruan some money that she agreed to the divorce. So, the matter was resolved peacefully. But Lady Ruan thinks it’s Young Master Yan’s fault. She didn’t cause any trouble at the Yan Mansion, but later she spread rumors in the city, saying that if it weren’t for your status, they wouldn’t even consider Young Master Yan. She also said that Young Master Yan is acting arrogantly because of your position—”

“That’s enough, no need to say anymore,” Yan Ge pressed his lips together. He could guess that Lady Ruan’s words were far from pleasant. His family must be very unhappy because of this.

“Papa, I’ll get off here,” Yan Jin, who had been quietly accompanying them, spoke up at that moment. He had come out of the palace to visit the new amusement park attraction—the cable car.

“Alright. Be careful,” Yan Ge lifted him off the carriage and handed him over to Gao Feng, saying, “Take good care of him.” Gao Feng responded,

“Young Master, rest assured.”

“Prince Ji, long time no see,” a passerby greeted Yan Jin. Yan Jin waved his small hand, “Long time no see. You’ve worked hard!”

Yan Ge: “…” Do you think you are the chief inspecting troops?

When the carriage arrived at the Yan Mansion, Yan Xiaojing, Madam Yan, and Yan Su had already received the news and were waiting at the entrance.

“Father, Mother, Big Brother!”

“Mmm, let’s go inside before talking,” Yan Xiaojing always maintained his strict-father image.

Madam Yan pulled Yan Ge aside and asked about his journey, showing concern and asking if he encountered any danger.

“No, everything went smoothly.” Yan Ge had the eunuchs bring the gifts from the carriage inside, “Father, Mother, Big Brother, these are the gifts I bought for you. Steward Yan Fu has worked hard for our family all these years, so I also prepared a gift for him. Take a look and see if you like them.”

“Thank you, Young Master, whatever you give, I will like it,” Yan Fu wiped his eyes, feeling touched.

After some small talk, Yan Ge looked at Yan Su, “Big Brother, I heard that you have divorced?”

Yan Su had lost some weight, but he looked to be in good spirits. He nodded calmly and said, “Thank you for your concern. Lady Ruan and I talked calmly before the divorce. You don’t need to worry.”

Madam Yan sighed and didn’t have the heart to continue looking at the gifts Yan Ge brought back. After dismissing the irrelevant people, she said, “Ge’er, try to persuade your Big Brother. I don’t know what your Big Brother is thinking, he actually wants to join the army!”

Yan Ge was surprised, “Join the army? If I remember correctly, Big Brother is a civil official, right?”

Yan Su said, “Mother, please don’t worry about this matter.”

Yan Xiaojing said sternly, “Nonsense! How can someone who wields a pen wield a sword?”

Yan Su patiently said, “Father, I have made up my mind, please don’t try to persuade me anymore.”

Yan Ge narrowed his eyes and asked tentatively, “Is it because of the idle gossip from those boring people?”

Yan Su paused for a moment, but did not deny it, “It is somewhat related to this matter.”

Yan Ge could understand Yan Su. The higher his position, the more attention Yan Xiaojing and Yan Su’s every move received, and the pressure became greater. After all, Yan Su was still a young man in his twenties , it was not easy for him. If this were in modern times, he would still be a university student.

“Big Brother, I have wronged you and Father.” Yan Ge patted Yan Su’s shoulder.

Yan Su frowned at him, “Second Brother, what are you saying? We are happy for what you have achieved. How can there be any troubles? Isn’t that right, Father?”

Yan Xiaojing nodded, and Madam Yan said, “Alright, enough of this family talk. Ge’er is impressive, but Su’er is also outstanding. He has been an official for several years, who can find fault with him? You two brothers are excellent. Su’er, give up this idea soon. You haven’t even settled down with a wife yet. If anything were to happen to you in the military camp, how would your father and I live?’ Madam Yan’s eyes welled up with tears as she spoke.

Yan Ge and Yan Su quickly surrounded her, trying to persuade her. Yan Su gestured to Yan Ge.

Yan Ge shrugged, “Mother’s concerns are not unreasonable.”

“Second Brother,” Yan Su said helplessly. “I’m asking you to persuade Mother, not add fuel to fire!”

Yan Ge spoke earnestly, ‘I am not joking with you. Once you join the army, you can only retire after at least three years. It won’t be easy to quit at that time. That’s one aspect…”

He cautiously surveyed the surroundings to ensure there was no one outside the door before continuing, “Yuchen intends to reform the military conscription system—”

“Ahem!” Yan Xiaojing interrupted with a stern face, “The Emperor has not mentioned this.”

“Father, rest assured, there is no one else here. As long as the four of us keep it a secret, there won’t be any issues.” Yan Ge waved his hand.

Yan Xiaojing was left speechless, and his beard twitched in frustration.

Yan Su chuckled; Father still can’t deal with Second Brother.

Yan Ge continued, “In the future, there will be periodic exchanges between soldiers in the mainland and those stationed at the border. Even if you serve in the mainland, if you happen to be transferred to the border and encounter any conflicts, how can we not worry?”

Madam Yan nodded repeatedly, “Yes, yes.”

Yan Su furrowed his brow, “But I truly want to join the army; it’s not an impulsive decision. These past two years, I’ve been serving as an observer, I don’t have to worry about anything because Father and other superiors take care of everything. I practically receive a salary from the court without doing anything. I’ve been wanting to make a move for a long time, and Lady Ruan’s matter served as a catalyst.”

Every man desires to make achievements. Yan Ge and Yan Xiaojing were momentarily speechless.

Madam Yan tried to persuade more, “But… what if something happens to you… wouldn’t our Yan family be cut off?”

Yan Su readily replied, “I can get married first before leaving.”

Yan Ge, Yan Xiaojing, and Madam Yan all looked at him in astonishment. Yan Ge shook his head subtly; it seemed that his eldest brother had been affected by his first marriage. Clearly, it was just to fulfill the duty of continuing the family line.

Madam Yan was overjoyed, “Recently so many matchmakers have come to your door to talk about marriage, but you didn’t say anything. Mother thought you didn’t even like anyone. You already have a match? Which girl is it?”

Yan Su said: “There was a matchmaker for Miss Wen last time. She doesn’t speak much and has a simple personality. I have asked someone to inquire about her, and I am very satisfied with her.”

Madam Yan hesitated, “Miss Wen? If I remember correctly, although she is the eldest daughter of the Wen family, she is the daughter of a concubine…”

“Mother,” Yan Ge interjected, “It’s not her fault for being born to a concubine. All that matters is that she is a good person, has a good relationship with Big Brother, and gets along well with mother. Wouldn’t that make everyone happy? Our family doesn’t need to rely on marriage for status.”

Madam Yan smiled and clapped her hands together, “Right, it’s Mother’s mistake. Su’er, are you sure she won’t turn out to be as eccentric as Lady Ruan?”

Yan Ge burst into laughter. Where did his mother learn this term?

“Little Jin mentioned it,” Madam Yan explained.

Yan Su: “I’m sure.’”

“Alright then,” Madam Yan said, “I’ll instruct the servants to make preparations.”

“Mmm. Sorry for the trouble, Mother,” Yan Su said.

Yan Xiaojing said, “You should inform the Ministry of Rites first, and I will go say a few words as well. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Thank you, Father and Mother, for your understanding.” Yan Su stood up and bowed.

“The imperial edict has arrived!” Xiao Changzi’s voice could be heard from the courtyard.

Yan Xiaojing opened the door and went out to greet him. Everyone knelt down. “Long live His Majesty, long live His Majesty…”

Xiao Changzi unfolded the imperial edict and began to read, “Bearing the fortune of heaven, the Emperor decrees: The Consort Yan Ge possesses exceptional talent, extraordinary wit, and worries for the country and its people. He is a blessing to us and a great fortune to the world. He shall be promoted to Caiqing, and rewarded with ten thousand taels of silver, a carved jade crown, and a carved gold pen. Thus decrees His Majesty!”

“Long live His Majesty!”

After the ceremony, Xiao Changzi handed the imperial edict to Yan Ge and congratulated him, “Congratulations, Yan Caiqing.”

“Thank you,” Yan Ge smiled and took out a five-tael silver ingot, handing it to him, “Please have some tea, Eunuch Changzi.”

“Thank you for the reward, Yan Caiqing.” Xiao Changzi said, “The Emperor also wants me to tell Yan Caiqing to finish work and return to the palace early today. He has good news to share with you.”

“I understand.”

Xiao Changzi took his leave.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen still had deep affection for each other, and Madam Yan, Yan Xiaojing, and Yan Su felt quite relieved.

After having lunch at the Yan Mansion, Yan Ge said to Yan Su, “Big Brother, please accompany me.”

Yan Su knew that he must have something else to say, so he nodded, “Alright.”

The two brothers left the residence together and got on the carriage. Yan Ge said, “I support you in pursuing your dream, Big Brother. However, I can’t deny that your sudden decision is influenced by the rumors and gossip in the city. It shows that you still lack stability in your character. I only hope that once you join the army, you will think twice before taking action, plan carefully before making a move. If you make impulsive decisions at the instigation of others, it will only let them have their way. And if something happens to you, Father, Mother, and your future wife will worry. As for the Ruan family, you don’t need to concern yourself with them. When you achieve success and fame, they will regret their actions.”

Yan Su stared at Yan Ge in surprise for a moment and chuckled, “You are indeed my younger brother. I will remember what you said.”

Yan Su also understood that Yan Ge couldn’t say too much.

From his sleeve, Yan Ge took out a small blue porcelain bottle and handed it to him, saying, “Your bones have already formed, and it’s not suitable for you to practice martial arts. But the pills inside this bottle can improve your physique and help you withstand rigorous training. Although it can’t cultivate inner strength, you can learn martial arts. Take it when you go back.”

Yan Su nodded, accepting the bottle. Yan Ge then handed him a secret martial arts manual he bought from the system store. “You can practice martial arts according to this manual.”

Next, he took out a small porcelain bottle from his sleeve, took off the Zhantian Vine on his head and squeezed out a drop of sap. He sealed the bottle with a stopper and handed it to Yan Su. “Practice diligently every morning and evening. In about two months, you should master the martial arts techniques in the manual. At that time, you can drink this drop of sap. Although you won’t be enough to deal with top martial artists, it will be sufficient for self-protection.”

“Thank you, brother,” Yan Su said gratefully to his younger brother. Yan Ge reached into his sleeve once again.

Yan Su chuckled, “How many more things are you going to give me?”

Yan Ge replied, “This is the last one,” as he handed him a thumb-sized pendant, saying, “You must carry this with you at all times. If you suffer a severe injury that cannot be treated, consuming the life-saving pill hidden inside can save your life.”

Yan Su received it and said, “I’ll wear it immediately. Thank you, Second Brother.” After Yan Su got off the carriage, Yan Ge instructed Xiao Shuanzi to drive to the company.

The first two days back in the capital would keep him busy.

MCUS Chapter 124

The secrecy of this southern tour was done very well. It was not until Yan Ge strictly instructed Wei Jushen and a few others to come to the company headquarters for a meeting that they learned that Yan Ge had not been in the capital for the past few months.

During the meeting, Wei Jushen, Wen Xian, Xiao Jinran, Zhang Mo, Ye Ziyang, Wan Xiang, and Xiao Chuanzi each reported on their work during this period. Yan Ge summarized their reports, offering rewards for good performance and providing suggestions for improvement for those who didn't do well. Finally, he roughly arranged the tasks for the next phase of work.

"The high-quality scented soaps should be put into production as soon as possible."

"The production of handbags, briefcases, and backpacks can be increased."

"Gao Feng, Gao Yun, you should start forming the football team."

"Yes."

Wei Jushen and the others were confused, but since Yan Ge didn't say much, they didn't ask further questions. The First Company had always emphasized confidentiality.

Finally, Yan Ge invited everyone to Liuxian Pavilion for a meal.

On the way back to the palace, Yan Ge finally had time to open the silver box.

“Take a look and see what’s inside,” Yan Jin also didn’t know the rewards for the random side missions.

–“Congratulations, you have obtained a pair of top grade spiritual swords.”

Yan Ge was overjoyed. The two swords sparkled, emitting a cold light as they floated in the air.

Ever since he started practicing martial arts, he had always wanted a suitable weapon. Huangfu Yuchen had given him the best sword, the Lingxiao Sword, from the imperial treasury. But that sword was just an ordinary one and not the most suitable for cultivators. These two spiritual swords were different; they possessed powerful spiritual energy, and their power would be even greater when used by cultivators.

“I didn’t expect it to be a pair,” Yan Ge smiled. “It’s just right for me and Yuchen to use.”

Yan Jin was not surprised and said, “By now, you must have realized that no matter what the side mission is—whether it’s simple, difficult, ordinary, or peculiar—it benefits your leveling up. In other words, side missions are designed to serve the main mission. The rewards from side missions naturally benefit the main mission, which means they benefit you, master.”

Yan Ge nodded, “I discovered that long ago. It’s just a pity that there is still one side mission left unfinished, which is to deal with the Vice leader of Centipede.”

“She will appear soon,” Yan Jin comforted.

“I remember you said that the next system upgrade would include a preservation function for the backpack. How much longer do we have to wait?” Yan Ge asked.

Yan Jin said, “I’m afraid we have to wait until you become Guqing.”

Yan Ge said, “Now that I have been promoted twice, it will still take some time for me to become Guiqing.”

Yan Jin said, “Hmm, there’s no rush.”

When they returned to Tenglong Palace, Yan Ge was surprised to find that the Empress was also there, quietly sitting in a chair, drinking tea. Huangfu Yuchen, on the other hand, was busy at a table far away from her, buried in his work.

As soon as the little crown prince saw Yan Jin, he ran over, and Yan Jin took him to a side chamber.

“You’re back,” Huangfu Yuchen put down his pen.

“Yes. I’ve seen the queen.” Yan Ge said.

Before he bowed in greeting, the empress spoke in a gentle voice, “You don’t need to be formal, Yan Caiqing.”

“Thank you, Empress,” Yan Ge wondered about her intentions. It was obvious that she was waiting for him while drinking tea.

Sure enough, the Empress signaled for everyone else to leave and spoke, “I came here for two reasons: first, I brought Xi’er over; secondly, I wanted to let Yan Caiqing know that I will support the Emperor and Yan Caiqing in the matters of the harem. I only hope that Yan Caiqing will always treat Yunxi as his own child.”

Yan Ge could see that she was truly relaxed. Her eyes were calm and pure, without any impurities. He solemnly replied, “Empress, you can rest assured. If I really wanted to harm Yunxi, I would have already done it from the countless opportunities before. Yunxi is Yuchen’s son, so he is also my son.”

The Empress nodded In relief, “Thank you, Yan Caiqing.”

Yan Ge paused for a moment, “Actually, I owe you an apology.”

“Xiao Ge, you did nothing wrong,” Huangfu Yuchen walked over to him, embracing his waist.

The Empress shook her head slightly, “Yan Caiqing, there’s no need to apologize. Didn’t the Emperor tell you? When the Emperor married me, it was just a contractual arrangement. He gave me the position of Empress, and I ensured peace in the harem. The Emperor has never loved me from the beginning to the end. What fault do you have? Furthermore, when I agreed to become Empress, I was well aware that the Emperor would not have only me. I just didn’t expect that the person he wanted would not be me but you.”

Yan Ge’s face felt a bit hot.

The Empress knelt down before Huangfu Yuchen and turned to leave.

“Why are you so hot?” Huangfu Yuchen touched Yan Ge’s face with consern.

Yan Ge pushed his hand away and narrowed his eyes at him, “Why did the Empress come to express herself at this moment?”

Huangfu Yuchen casually replied, “ I have issued a decree to all the palaces, ordering the dismissal of all consorts. For the remaining few, their monthly allowances will be increased by one level as compensation, and there will be nothing else for them.”

Yan Ge’s heart was both pleasantly surprised and somewhat sour. He looked at Huangfu Yuchen with a smile that wasn’t quite a smile. He put is so delicately, “the remaining few” referred to those who had already served the emperor.

“Baby,” Huangfu Yuchen pressed Yan Ge’s head against his chest, “those are things from a long time ago.”

“For the sake of your good performance,” Yan Ge wouldn’t really dwell on past matters, “I’ll let it go and give you a gift.”

“What is it?” Huangfu Yuchen asked.

Yan Ge took out two identical spiritual swords, “Little Jin gave them to me. These are spiritual swords used by cultivators. Once blood is dripped on them, their wonders will be revealed.”

Huangfu Yuchen picked up one of them and carefully examined it, his eyes filled with admiration. “Good things!”

He casually picked up a piece of paper, let it float down, and it immediately broke upon touching the blade. Then he placed the sword blade down on the table without applying any force, and the table was sliced in half.

Both of them used their qi to force a drop of fresh blood from their fingertips onto the spiritual swords. After a fleeting white light flashed on the spiritual swords, they both felt a mysterious connection between themselves and the swords.

Yan Ge said, “When our cultivation reaches a higher level, we can store these spiritual swords within our dantian and use them as needed.”

“Thank you for the gift, baby. I really like it,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

Yan Jin pulled the Little Crown Prince into the hall and said, “Father Emperor, since your mood is good, can I take the Little Crown Prince to the amusement park tomorrow?”

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at him, “Who told you that if I’m in a good mood, I would agree to let you go out and play?”

“No one told me,” Yan Jin pouted and gestured with his finger, stealing a glance at Yan Ge.

The Little Crown Prince tried hard to appear calm, but his eyes revealed his hidden eagerness.

Huangfu Yuchen winked at Yan Ge, telling him not to agree.

Yan Ge nudged him with his elbow, “Okay—”

“Baby, I should have known that you would oppose me. I should have agreed,” Huangfu Yuchen helplessly said.

“But—” Yan Ge smiled at him, “Why are you so anxious? I haven’t finished speaking.”

Yan Jin and the Little Crown Prince’s excited expressions froze on their faces.

Yan Ge gently said to the Little Crown Prince, “I’ll allow you to go to the amusement park, but not now. There are many scholars in the capital these days, among them are talents who are well-read. The Little Crown Prince should visit the places where these scholars gather, which will be beneficial.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, “Indeed.”

Yan Ge patted the Little Crown Prince’s shoulder, “In the coming days, I will have your father make arrangements for someone to take you out of the palace. When you return, you can tell your father about what you saw and heard. It would be even better if you could write it down, consider it as the assignment I’m giving you. If your father feels that you have learned something from it, after the spring examinations, he will take you to the amusement park. How about that?”

The Little Crown Prince replied solemnly, “I will observe and listen carefully, and then report back to Father Emperor and Second Master.”

“Alright.” Yan Ge smiled and ruffled his little head, letting Yan Jin take him to play for a while.

“Baby, you’re too good to him, it makes me jealous.” Huangfu Yuchen said sourly.

Yan Ge raised an eyebrow, “Am I not good to you?”

“Good. But I just hope you’re good to me alone.” Huangfu Yuchen hugged him from behind.

Yan Ge was speechless. If he wasn't your son, would I put so much effort into him?

"Okay, I promise to be better to you in the future."

Yan Ge glanced at the desk, "What were you busy with just now?"

Huangfu Yuchen said, "I have been considering reforming the imperial examination system. The ministers have written memorials on the subject."

Reforming the imperial examination system? Yan Ge turned his head and looked at him with a smile. "Yuchen, I believe that one day you will become an emperor who is remembered throughout the ages."

Huangfu Yuchen smirked, "Do you have that much confidence in me? Without meeting you, perhaps I wouldn't have considered this matter so soon. I learned a lot from you during this southern expedition."

Yan Ge extended his hand.

Huangfu Yuchen didn't understand, "What is it?"

"Where is the gift to honor your master?" Yan Ge said naturally.

Huangfu Yuchen patted himself, but found nothing. After returning to the palace, he didn't carry a money pouch like he did outside the palace. He bowed his head and gave Yan Ge a kiss on the lips. "The emperor's kiss, a priceless treasure."

Yan Ge clicked his tongue and asked about the important matters. "How do you plan to reform?"

Huangfu Yuchen handed him the booklet, motioning for him to sit down, and began massaging his shoulders. "It's just a preliminary idea."

Yan Ge comfortably leaned back in his chair, reading and reciting, "Increase practical analysis and problem-solving methods… Not bad, not bad…"

Huangfu Yuchen saw that he hadn’t turned a page for quite some time and lowered his head in confusion.

Yan Ge had a vacant look in his eyes, not knowing where his thoughts had wandered off to.

“What are you thinking about?”

Yan Ge snapped back to reality, “Do you remember the Dahan numbers I taught you and the Little Crown Prince before?”

Actually, they were just Arabic numerals, but in this world, Arabic didn’t exist, so these numbers were essentially original creations. That’s why he gave them the name “Dahan numbers.”

“I remember. Those numbers are amazing,” Huangfu Yuchen said, “Why do you mention them? I remember you said they weren’t ready to be promoted nationwide yet.”

Yan Ge explained, “At that time, the First Company hadn’t established a solid foundation yet. The Dahan numbers were primarily used for product numbering, and maintaining their uniqueness was necessary. Now that you’ve decided to reform the imperial examination system, you can also promote these numbers nationwide. It will also make it easier to teach new counting and accounting methods in the future.”

Huangfu Yuchen squeezed into his chair and sat down, “Baby, how about using numbers as a secret code? For example, if I write down a series of numbers on paper— 140608, 080807, 910513, and then give you a book.” He then picked up a book of “The Analects” and said, “On page 14, column 6, the 8th character is ‘　’; on page 8, column 8…”

Before he could finish, Yan Ge already understood what he meant, “You mean using numbers as a secret code?”

“Exactly,” Huangfu Yuchen said, “It can be used for military purposes. Sending spies and infiltrators to other kingdoms is common, and if the enemy’s spies gain access to military deployments, it could result in losing

a war. If we transform military information into numbers, the possibility of enemy spies obtaining intelligence will be greatly reduced."

Yan Ge cupped his Huangfu Yuchen's, looking up, down, left, and right.

Huangfu Yuchen clutched his head, "Are you planning to open up my skull to see what's inside?" It was too awkward and funny to have a cold face pretending to be scared.

Yan Ge slapped his hand, "Stop acting cute."

Huangfu Yuchen sighed. Wasn't he just imitating him?

"What do you think of this idea?"

Yan Ge praised him, "Impressive! But it should be a book a few people know about."

"Naturally," Huangfu Yuchen nodded, indicating that he understood.

Yan Ge asked with some concern, "Are you suddenly mentioning this because we're going to war soon?"

"Of course not, it's just that as an emperor, I consider every aspect," Huangfu Yuchen said.

MCUS Chapter 125

The imperial harem erupted in chaos when Huangfu Yuchen's decree to dismiss the consorts spread. Upon receiving the decree, the consorts hurriedly made their way to the Empress's Yongyi Palace. The only one in the harem that had the power to contend with Huangfu Yuchen was the Empress.

The Empress agreed to meet all the consorts, including Yan Jin, and hosted a banquet in the Qunfang Palace to entertain them. However, to their surprise, the Empress was unusually calm, and from her demeanor, It seemed that she supported their departure from the palace.

Delicious delicacies filled the air with a tantalizing aroma, and the melodious sounds of silk and bamboo instruments echoed pleasantly. However, these could not alleviate the low spirits of the consorts. Among them, a few had already resigned themselves to their fate, acknowledging that they lacked the strength to fight with Yan Jin. Rather than living a lonely life in the palace, they believed it was better to take a chance and leave the palace in hopes of marrying a better man. Being called "the Emperor's women" sounded glamorous and prestigious, but if they were not favored by the Emperor, their status in the harem was not much better than that of palace maids. As daughters of officials, people dared not speak idle gossip in their presence out of respect for their fathers. Moreover, the Emperor had promised to grant them titles. Some were reluctantly accepting the situation, knowing that their only choice was to leave. Others felt a deep reluctance to depart.

Seeing the consorts' lack of appetite, the Empress broached the main topic directly, "If you wish to leave the palace, inform me within two days. The Emperor will not force you to leave, but you should know that if you miss this opportunity, there will be no chance for you to leave the palace in the

future. Consider it carefully. If I don't receive your names within two days, I will assume that you don't want to leave the palace. Is that clear?"

A few consorts responded softly.

Consort Rou, who already a child, naturally decided to stay in the palace. Among the guests, she was the only one who seemed at ease. Although the Emperor didn't favor her, she had her child to keep her company, and she would not be lonely in the future.

Consort Zhao spoke expressionlessly, "This consort will stay."

Consort Li and Consort Zheng made the same choice as her.

"Empress…" Tian Guiren could no longer contain her emotional outburst. "Could you please persuade the Emperor? Since we entered the palace in response to the decree, we belong to the Emperor. How can we leave the palace now?"

The Empress replied calmly, "If Tian Guiren wants to stay, you may stay. As I have already said, the Emperor will not force any of you to leave."

"But…" Tian Guiren glanced around. The others remained silent, and she was the only one daring enough to protest. She bit her lip and said no more. She used to be proud and pleased to be the only new consort favored by the Emperor, but now she regretted why she was the only one. She had no allies. The Empress, Consort Rou, and the others have been in the harem longer and it was impossible to expect any support from.

Under Huangfu Yuchen's secret arrangement, Yan Ge's life remained unaffected by the turmoil in the harem.

–"Ding: Side mission – Develop the capital into a famous city. Mission duration: two years. Reward for successful completion: 2 million taels of silver and one golden chest. Failure to complete the mission: deduction of 10,000 taels of silver. To accept the mission, choose "yes". To decline the mission, choose "no."

Yan Ge communicated secretly with Yan Jin, “At what level of development can the capital be considered ‘famous’?”

Yan Jin cupped his face, “When everyone in Great Han as well as foreigners have heard of the capital’s fame.”

Yan Ge twitched his lips, “Pretend I didn’t ask. First, help me check if the system store has any limestone for sale.”

Yan Jin remained silent for a few seconds before replying, “Yes, it’s available. One coin per two catties.”

Things that exist in this world usually come at a fair price, while many things that aren’t in this world are sold at exorbitant prices. Yan Ge said, “So, there is plenty of limestone in this world. That resolves the biggest problem.”

“Master, what do you want to do with this?” Yan Jin asked.

“You’ll know soon enough.” Yan Ge purchased twenty to thirty catties of limestone, placed them in a box, and had two little eunuchs carry it as they went to the Imperial Study to find Huangfu Yuchen.

It can be said that he could freely move around the palace without any hindrance. The guards at the entrance bowed and allowed him entry without asking any questions.

“Yuchen.”

“Why didn’t you use the sedan chair?” Huangfu Yuchen approached him.

“I can walk faster than that thing.” Yan Ge sat on the cool jade couch.

“It’s so hot. At least it can shade you from the sun,” Huangfu Yuchen chuckled. “Are you in a hurry?”

“Not really. I’m just used to walking fast,” Yan Ge replied. He had the eunuchs open the box and said, “Do we have this kind of stone in Great Han?”

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at it, “I’m not sure. What’s so special about this stone?”

“This is limestone, which can be used to make cement,” Yan Ge explained.

“Cement?” Huangfu Yuchen was puzzled. “What is that?”

“It is something with a strong adhesive property and can be used for road construction and building. This type of stone is quite common and should be easy to find,” Yan Ge said.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, “I will immediately instruct the Minister of Works to send people to collect this stone from various places.”

“Great. The reconstruction project of the capital should start as soon as possible. It’s still bearable in summer, but if it’s delayed until winter, the conditions will worsen,” Yan Ge advised. “By the way, besides limestone, we also need to gather as much clay as possible.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Don’t worry. You just need to oversee and plan. If there’s anything you need, just let me know, and I’ll arrange it.”

“Alright, then I’ll head out first.”

Yan Ge, accompanied by Gao Feng, Gao Yun, and Du Juan, roamed through the streets of the capital. Xiao Shuanzi drove the carriage and led the horses, following behind at a leisurely pace.

They spent two consecutive days exploring the city.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun had joined Yan Ge’s journey south, leaving Zhao Cheng in charge of the winery. Seeing that Zhao Cheng had taken the responsibility well, Gao Feng suggested to Yan Ge that Zhao Cheng should manage the workshop, as they preferred accompanying Yan Ge and participating in the development of new business projects. They found it more interesting.

As for Wan Xiang, she had become very busy. Having a maidservant by Yan Ge’s side made things more convenient at times, so Huangfu Yuchen

had transferred Du Juan to Yan Ge's side, as her wit and loyalty were unquestionable during the Southern Tour.

The people of the capital were already accustomed to Yan Caiqing's down-to-earth personality. They no longer felt overly excited or performed frequent salutations upon seeing him. When they crossed paths on the street, they would bow to Yan Ge and then continue on their way. Their respect for Yan Ge was deeply ingrained itself in their hearts, so the outward formalities had gradually become less important.

Only the scholars coming to the capital for the exams still found it difficult to suppress their excitement upon seeing Yan Ge. Recently, they had learned about the various benefits the First Company offered to scholars, and they were filled them with gratitude. Every time they saluted Yan Ge, they did so with utmost correctness.

"Young Master, may I ask what you are looking for?" Gao Yun couldn't hold back his curiosity after two days.

Yan Ge used Huangfu Yuchen as an excuse, "The Emperor intends to renovate the capital and sent me out to assess the situation."

"Renovation?" Gao Feng exclaimed. "I think the capital is already good enough. It's better than many other prefectural cities we passed through on our journey south. What more can be done?"

Yan Ge smiled and pointed to a tea stall by the roadside, asking, "Do you know how the used tea leaves and residue are handled at tea stalls?"

Gao Feng replied, "They are thrown away."

"Where do they dump them?" Yan Ge asked further.

Gao Yun said, "In secluded areas or the river, I suppose."

"That's right," Yan Ge said. "It's not just tea stalls; even the wastewater from dishwashing and cleaning vegetables is disposed of haphazardly. Leftover rice and vegetables that haven't gone bad are fed to pigs, and the

spoiled ones are discarded. Haven’t you noticed that some parts of the capital are dirty and messy? The air doesn’t smell pleasant, especially in summer. Additionally, when it rains, stagnant water accumulates in flat areas, making it difficult to disperse. It even emits a foul odor during hot weather. Moreover, there are some streets in the capital with problems—they are too narrow and inconvenient for traffic. These issues are quite prevalent.”

As they thought about it, they realized that it was indeed the case.

“The capital is the heart and image of our Great Han Kingdom. Why not make it more beautiful if we can?” Yan Ge expressed with a sense of pride and excitement.

On hearing this, everyone felt a sense of honor and looked forward to it.

Gao Yun said, “According to Young Master’s words, this is indeed a significant project.”

Yan Ge nodded. “We’ll take it step by step.”

“Some of the main streets in the center of the capital are surrounded by numerous houses. Expanding them will likely be challenging,” Gao Feng pointed out.

“Problems are meant to be solved by people,” Yan Ge said confidently. “Let’s keep moving forward. It would be best to go through every street today.”

They continued walking. Du Juan carried paper, pen, and the map of the capital. Whenever they encountered important locations, Gao Feng would bow his body and serve as a makeshift table, while Gao Yun and Du Juan unfolded the map, allowing Yan Ge to make marks.

Onlookers understood that Yan Caiqing was thinking of an important matter, so they consciously kept their distance to avoid suspicion of eavesdropping.

“Yan Bao—”

A sudden shout echoed through the street, accompanied by the sound of galloping horses. Passersby calmly moved to the sides.

Lately, both Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge had been busy with state affairs. Sometimes, Huangfu Yuchen had important matters that needed to be relayed to Yan Ge as quickly as possible, and they exchanged messages three or four times a day. Since it was not an official decree or oral command, they named it “Yan Bao,” meaning urgent matters to inform Yan Ge. When the common people heard “Yan Bao,” they would clear the way for the messenger to pass.

Yan Ge heard the call and waited by the roadside.

The horse approached him at a moderate pace, and the messenger on the horse dismounted swiftly, respectfully kneeling down, “Reporting to Yan Caiqing, the Emperor has instructed me to deliver a message to you, reminding you not to forget to have lunch.”

The onlookers chuckled.

Yan Ge touched his face with embarrassment. “Tell him that I understand. Also, let him know not to send someone specifically for such trivial matters next time; it’s embarrassing.”

The messenger said, “The Emperor said that if Yan Caiqing says so, I should reply that if you remember to have your meals, he naturally wouldn’t send a message for such things.”

Yan Ge sighed, “Alright, alright. I understand.”

Only then did the messenger mount the horse and leave.

Yan Ge quickened his pace, leaving that awkward place.

Gao Feng and the others chuckled in secret.

Yan Ge paused for a moment, then obediently walked to a nearby restaurant, to avoid Huangfu Yuchen specially reminding him to have lunch again.

Duke Lu Heng saw Yan Ge from a distance and hesitated for a moment before catching up.

“Yan Caiqing, please wait!” Duke Lu Heng called out.

Yan Ge stopped and glanced at the approaching person. He didn’t recognize him.

Gao Feng whispered, “Young Master, this person is Duke Lu Heng.”

“So it’s Duke Lu Heng.” Yan Ge cupped his hand in greeting.

“I have met Yan Caiqing,” Duke Lu Heng said. “Yan Caiqing, I have something to discuss with you. Can you spare some time?”

“I was just about to have lunch. Duke Lu Heng, why don’t you join me?” Yan Ge suggested.

“Thank you, Yan Caiqing, please.”

“Duke Lu Heng, please.” Yan Ge insisted that Duke Lu Heng go first. Duke Lu Heng held a higher rank, while Yan Ge held a lower rank, so they couldn’t ignore the proper etiquette in front of others.

Once they were seated in a private room, Yan Ge asked directly, “Duke Lu Heng, what business do you have? I suppose it’s not a state matter. There are no outsiders here, so feel free to speak.”

Duke Lu Heng said, “Since that’s the case, I will be straightforward. It’s about my son.”

A hint of confusion flashed across Yan Ge’s eyebrows.

Gao Feng reminded him in a low voice, “Duke Lu Heng has only one son, Lu Shaoling. A long time ago, he was in a clothing store…”

Before Gao Feng finished, Yan Ge remembered. “Ah, I remember.”

“To be honest, I am ashamed to say that my son has been indulging in eating, drinking, and pleasure these past few years, doing nothing constructive. This cannot go on. Recently, it seems he admires Young Master Feng and Young Master Yun. Although he has yet to make any progress, at least he now has some ambition. Therefore, I have an earnest request, and I would like to trouble Yan Caiqing to arrange something for him in the First Company, to give him an opportunity for personal growth.”

Yan Ge raised an eyebrow. “Duke Lu Heng’s words surprise me. I understand your intention. Allowing Master Lu to work in the First Company is possible. However, Duke Lu Heng, you must understand one thing. My First Company is not open to just anyone, so don’t blame me for not giving you face. I can be frank with you; sometimes, even the Emperor’s face is not enough for me.” Thinking about the times when Emperor Huangfu Yuchen looked helpless because of him, Yan Ge couldn’t help but find it amusing.

Duke Lu Heng quickly said, “I understand. It’s already giving me face by considering it. Yan Caiqing, please challenge him and test him! If he does well, it’s naturally good. But If he doesn’t, even if Yan Caiqing doesn’t kick him out, I will personally do it. I cannot afford that embarrassment!”

Yan Ge smiled, “With Duke Lu Heng’s words, I can be assured. I need manpower recently, so you can have him come anytime.”

“Yes, thank you, Yan Caiqing.”

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The next day, Lu Shaoling arrived early at the First Company to report to Yan Ge. He was dressed neatly and appeared serious, unlike the first time they met when he seemed carefree. This relieved Yan Ge a little; at least Lu Shaoling indeed had ambition.

Yan Ge assigned him the task of measuring the width of several main streets in the capital that were less than eight meters wide and making detailed records.

Lu Shaoling hadn't expected the task assigned to him to be so "physically demanding," but seeing Yan Ge's resolute demeanor, he had no choice but to accept it. He took a pen and a notebook printed by the printing press and went to work.

Yan Ge completed the inspection of the capital and the day of the imperial examination arrived.

In order to prevent any officials from favoritism or corruption, Huangfu Yuchen changed all the examiners a day in advance. Yan Ge explained to him the system of using pseudonyms and the recording system, which Huangfu Yuchen greatly praised, but there wasn't enough time to arrange it for the imperial examination this time.

The imperial examination lasted for nine days, and the entire capital was influenced by the atmosphere of the examination, becoming much quieter than usual.

After the imperial examination, a group of officials reviewed the exam papers together, and those who were selected became Gongshi. Finally, these Gongshi would face questioning from the Emperor himself or

ministers appointed by the Emperor, known as the Dianshi. The selected candidates were collectively called Jinshi. Afterwards, the Emperor personally evaluated the top ten papers, appointing the Zhuangyuan, Bangyan, and Tanhua. (No.1,2 and 3 scholar?)

On the day of the announcement, the capital was filled with the sounds of firecrackers and drums, creating a lively atmosphere. Under the imperial list, there was a crowd of people.

The most eye-catching event was the “Selection of Son-in-law under the List.” This referred to the noble families or officials selecting Jinshi as husbands for their unmarried daughters. The main reason, of course, was that these Jinshi had exceptional talents and limitless prospects. Those who were quick would succeed, while those who were slow would miss out. Some Jinshi readily accepted, while others maintained their pride and dismissed the idea.

Yan Ge had never heard of such a thing before, so Huangfu Yuchen took him to a good spot to watch the spectacle. Occasionally, when a Jinshi with a good ranking and appearance was selected by several families, they would compete for him like fighting over a treasure. The Jinshi’s hat and robes would be pulled askew, which Yan Ge found amusing.

After a while, the festive drumbeats drew closer. The Zhuangyuan, Bangyan, and Tanhua, adorned with large red flowers, rode horses through the streets, surrounded by a crowd.

“Tomorrow is the Qionglin Banquet. Will your elder brother come?” Huangfu Yuchen asked Yan Ge.

“He probably won’t come. He has already made up his mind to marry Miss Wen. I just hope he won’t make the wrong choice this time.”

About twenty days before and after the imperial examination, all the officials in the capital were very busy. Yan Ge himself was also extremely busy these past few days and couldn’t take a break. He would only be able to truly leave his post in a few days. Yan Su’s wedding date had already been set for ten days from now.

The Qionglin Banquet this time was grander than any in the past two hundred years because it was also the Hundred Flowers Banquet organized by Huangfu Yuchen to disperse the palace consorts. Within the Qionglin Garden, colorful lanterns were hung, illuminating the place as if it were daytime. Fresh flowers and colorful flags adorned the elegant garden, creating a lively yet noble atmosphere.

Within the garden, handsome men and beautiful women mingled among the banquet tables, creating a lively scene. All the ministers and nobles knew about the Emperor's plan to disperse the palace consorts, so they brought their unmarried sons and grandsons along.

The top one hundred Jinshi, including the Zhuangyuan, Bangyan, and Tanhua, had also heard rumors of this and attended the banquet dressed in their best. The consorts who were willing to leave the palace had already received the Emperor's decree during the day. They were mostly county princesses, enjoying the monthly stipend from the court and holding a status equivalent to a duke's daughter. They were all dressed in their finest attire, emitting a fragrant aroma and creating a garden full of blossoms. The men present were treated to a feast for the eyes, and it was clear that there were many who envied the Emperor's unenjoyed blessings.

Consort Rou, Consort Zhao, Consort Li, Consort Zheng, and Tian Guiren were absent.

The Empress arrived at the Tenglong Palace with the Little Crown Prince, and Yan Ge was somewhat surprised.

Huangfu Yuchen quickly grasped the Empress's intentions.

The Empress said, "Emperor, I see that you still need some time to prepare. How about this consort, the Crown Prince, and Yan Caiqing go ahead."

"That's fine," Huangfu Yuchen agreed.

Yan Ge finally understood the Empress's plan and accepted her kindness.

Holding hands with the Little Crown Prince, Yan Ge walked side by side with the Empress towards the Qionglin Garden.

Yan Ge and the Empress appearing together caused a brief silence in the surroundings. The two walked side by side, smiling and conversing in low voices. Even the Little Crown Prince held Yan Ge's hand with a smile, indicating the obvious implications.

"I truly have to thank you this time," Yan Ge said.

The Empress replied, "This is for the Great Han Kingdom and for the Crown Prince."

"I understand," Yan Ge said.

The three of them reached the high platform, and the crowd bowed together. "We pay respects to Empress, pay respects to the Crown Prince, and pay respects to Yan Caiqing!"

The Empress smiled, "Rise, everyone. Today is a celebration for the court and the Great Han Kingdom. There's no need to be so formal."

"Thank you, Empress!"

The Little Crown Prince went to find Yan Jin, while Yan Ge and the Empress Dowager didn't immediately take their seats but instead stood on the high platform, speaking in low voices.

The Empress said, "The four consorts seem to be fine for now, but Tian Guiren seems dissatisfied. However, both you and the Emperor can rest assured; I can handle it."

Yan Ge replied gently, "Empress, you can tell them on my behalf that if they choose to stay, they can stay with peace of mind. As long as they don't provoke Yan Jin or disrupt me, I will not mistreat them in any way."

The Empress nodded, "I believe you. It is evident that besides the Emperor, you care about the First Company and the development of the Great Han

Kingdom. If you were a woman, I'm afraid my position as Empress wouldn't be secure."

Yan Ge chuckled. How could he respond to such words?

At that moment, an Eunuch's high-pitched and sharp voice came from outside the garden, "The Emperor has arrived!"

The people engaged in conversation quickly made way to the sides.

Huangfu Yuchen looked up at Yan Ge and the Empress, smiling as he said, "You two couldn't even wait for me. I will have to make you drink three cups of wine as a punishment."

Yan Ge readily agreed, "No problem. But I'm afraid the Empress may not be able to handle the wine, so I will drink her share."

The Empress's laughter was melodious, "It's better for the Emperor to drink Yan Caiqing's share."

Huangfu Yuchen said helplessly, "I have brought punishment upon myself."

The people present heard his indulgent tone and once again silently sighed at the Emperor's concern for Yan Ge. However, the close relationship between the Empress and Yan Ge also alleviated their concerns about any disharmony between the Emperor and the Empress.

After Huangfu Yuchen ascended the high platform, everyone knelt down, chanting, "Long live, the Emperor!"

"Rise, everyone, and take your seats."

"Thank you, Emperor."

In the center of the high platform was a golden chair, and on each side were two tables, making a total of three seats. Everyone assumed that the Emperor and the Empress would sit in the center, with the Crown Prince and Yan Ge on the left and right sides. But when they looked up, they saw

Huangfu Yuchen and the Crown Prince sitting in the center, with the Empress and Yan Ge on either side.

Huangfu Yuchen would avoid sitting together with the Empress if he could. Allowing the Crown Prince to sit together with Yan Ge didn't violate the rules of etiquette, as the Crown Prince was the future Emperor, and no one could find fault with that.

Huangfu Yuchen said, "Today's banquet is to celebrate the success of all the talented scholars who have become Jinshi. First, I offer a toast to all of you."

The Jinshi raised their cups, stood up, and exclaimed, "Thank you, Emperor," before drinking the toast.

Huangfu Yuchen continued, "Each of you has distinguished yourselves among the many talents in the country, showing exceptional knowledge. In the future, you will all be pillars of the court. You should be strict with yourselves, strive for progress, and I look forward to hearing your names from the mouths of the ministers again."

"Thank you for your wise words, Emperor. We will remember your teachings and be loyal to the sovereign, serve the country, and alleviate the worries of the people!"

"Very good!" Huangfu Yuchen said, "Let the feast begin. You all need not feel restrained; enjoy yourselves to the fullest."

"We will follow your decree!"

Jiang Gan said, "Your Majesty, the moonlight is beautiful tonight, the wine is exquisite, and the women are enchanting. How about composing poetry and engaging in a poetic duel to enhance the mood? What does Your Majesty think?"

"What do you think, Yan Caiqing?" Huangfu Yuchen didn't want to stay at the banquet too long .After all, there was another purpose for the banquet today, and his presence would make it awkward for everyone.

Yan Ge was experiencing such a grand court gathering for the first time and was somewhat interested. But seeing that Huangfu Yuchen wasn't enthusiastic, he cunningly teased Jiang Gan, "Good idea. I've heard that Prime Minister Wen is exceptionally talented. Why don't you start first?"

Jiang Gan wiped his sweat and thought, 'Yan Caiqing, we went through a lot of difficult times together during the southern expedition. There's no need to set me up like this.'

Huangfu Yuchen smiled, "Hmm, everyone knows that Prime Minister Wen is highly knowledgeable. Xiao Ge, if you don't believe it, you can test him with a question."

The two of them played off each other.

Jiang Gan could only comply, "I will follow the order."

Yan Ge smiled and pursed his lips. "Your Majesty, I do have a couplet in mind, but I am concerned that Prime Minister Wen might not be able to respond to it."

Jiang Gan's scalp tingled. Could Yan Caiqing's couplet be that difficult?

The rest of the people were eagerly waiting to see what would happen.

Huangfu Yuchen said, "You underestimate Prime Minister Wen. Isn't that right, Prime Minister Wen?""

Under everyone's gaze, Jiang Gan reluctantly stood up. "I am not talented, but I will do my best."

Yan Jin smiled and affectionately held Jiang Gan's hand. "Father, don't worry. Even if you can't answer, there are so many talented scholars here."

Everyone burst into laughter. Wasn't this son too adorable? He was openly mocking his own father.

Jiang Gan helplessly patted Yan Jin's little head.

Yan Caiqing said, “Since that’s the case, please listen to the couplet: ‘Gazing at the river tower, gazing at the flowing river; beneath the river tower, gazing at the flowing river. The river tower lasts for eternity, as does the flowing river.’”

“An excellent couplet, excellent!” Duke You chuckled and nodded at Song Chaobang.

Song Chaobang also smiled and nodded. “Indeed. The brilliance of this couplet lies in its multiple interpretations and various artistic conceptions. Coming up with a suitable response is not easy.”

The ministers and talented scholars pondered over a suitable response for the couplet. They whispered and discussed in hushed voices, expressing their admiration for the difficulty of this couplet.

After a moment of pacing, Jiang Gan smiled. “I have come up with a response.”

“Oh?” Yan Caiqing nodded. “Prime Minister Wen is truly worthy of his reputation.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “How about this? Prime Minister Wen, write down your response to the couplet, and the other scholars can also try to come up with a response. It’s a good opportunity for the consorts who are about to be dismissed to witness the talent of these scholars.”

As writing the response and placing it on the table, Jiang Gan glanced at Yan Caiqing and said to Huangfu Yuchen, “Your Majesty, to be honest, I have long admired Yan Caiqing’s talent, and I believe that the scholars who have come from afar have also heard of his reputation. Since Yan Caiqing has presented such an exquisite couplet, I am confident that he can also come up with a response to the couplet. How about after the other scholars and I have presented our responses, Yan Caiqing also presents his response to the couplet?”

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Huangfu Yuchen secretly took note of Jiang Gan's response and looked at Yan Ge. "Yan Caiqing, what do you think?"

Yan Ge pondered for a moment, then smiled and said, "This couplet was something I accidentally heard during my trip south. It is said that no one has been able to come up with a response to it. At that time, I also tried to come up with a response but couldn't. However, being provoked by Prime Minister Wen like this, I actually have a response. I must thank Prime Minister Wen. Bring me a pen."

A palace maid opened a sheet of paper, and Yan Ge swiftly wrote down a line of characters before sealing the paper.

The Empress suggested, "Your Majesty, since Yan Caiqing, Prime Minister Wen, and the other scholars are so interested, why don't we offer a reward? The ladies might as well give it a try too."

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. "Alright. The best performer among the men will be rewarded with a golden pen, and the best performer among the women will be rewarded with a golden flower. How about that?"

Yan Ge smiled. "If others win, they can be rewarded accordingly. But if I win, I would like Prime Minister Wen to do something for me. I wonder if Prime Minister Wen dares to accept the challenge."

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled. "What do you think, Prime Minister Wen?"

Jiang Gan confidently said, "I accept the challenge."

"It seems that both Yan Caiqing and Prime Minister Wen are very confident," Huangfu Yuchen said. "So be it. Have the other scholars come

up with their responses?”

One scholar stood up, bowed to the higher-ups, and said, “This scholar is not talented. Gazing at the imperial city, gazing at Your Majesty; gazing at the imperial city, gazing at Your Majesty. Long live the imperial city, long live Your Majesty.”

Some nodded, but most shook their heads.

Huangfu Yuchen commented, “This couplet is not bad, but the repetition of ‘gazing at’ in both ‘gazing at the river tower’ and ‘gazing at the imperial city’ is not suitable for a response.”

The ministers concurred.

Several other scholars presented their responses, but they fell short.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Prime Minister Wen, reveal your response.”

Jiang Gan handed the paper to a young eunuch to display it to everyone. At the same time, he recited, “Competing poetic stage, competing poetic talent; on the competing poetic stage, competing poetic talent. The poetic stage is unmatched, the poetic talent is unmatched.”

Some couldn’t help but nod repeatedly.

“Very good, very good!”

“It is not only well-structured but also fitting.”

However, some shook their heads. “The phrase ‘gazing at the flowing river’ can be interpreted as ‘gazing at-flowing river’ or ‘gazing-flowing river.’ It doesn’t match well with ‘competing poetic talent.’”

“I wonder what Yan Caiqing’s response is?” Everyone was very curious.

Yan Ge handed the paper to the young eunuch, who held it up with both hands to display it.

Yan Ge said, “Poetry contest, talent’s race, on the poetry stage, talent’s grace. Unparalleled contest, unmatched art, unmatched art, unparalleled contest.

As soon as he finished speaking, someone couldn’t help but loudly praise it.

“Good! Good!”

Huangfu Yuchen looked approvingly. “To avoid accusations of bias, I won’t give my comment. Let all the esteemed ministers share their thoughts. Who, between Prime Minister Wen and Yan Caiqing, has a better response?”

Most people agreed that Yan Caiqing had a better response.

Jiang Gan also bowed to Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge, saying, “This humble officials concedes. ‘gazing at the imperial city’ is just like ‘gazing at the river tower’ in that it can be understood as ‘gazing at’ or ‘gazing below.’ It is indeed less ingenious than ‘competing poetic talent.’ I humbly acknowledge it.”

Yan Ge waved his hand. “It was just a coincidence.”

A smile appeared on Huangfu Yuchen’s lips. “Although Yan Caiqing came out on top, both Prime Minister Wen and the other scholars have great talent. They will all be rewarded with a golden pen.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty!”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “I am not feeling well after drinking too much. I will leave it to the Empress and Prime Minister Wen to handle the rest. Everyone, please enjoy yourselves.”

Everyone stood up. “We bid farewell to Your Majesty—”

Huangfu Yuhu saw Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen leaving together. Taking advantage of the distraction, he quietly left his seat and caught up with them.

“Brother.”

“Yuhu?” Huangfu Yuchen stopped in his tracks.

Huangfu Yuhu glanced at Yan Ge.

Yan Ge said, “Yuchen, I’m feeling a bit tired. I’ll go back first.”

“Alright.”

Back at the Tenglong Palace, Yan Ge completed his cultivation tasks and was preparing to take a bath when Huangfu Yuchen returned.

“What were you talking about for so long? I was about to take a bath.” Yan Ge walked over and embraced him by the waist.

“We can go together.” Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge walked toward the bathroom. “Yuhu wants me to give Song Guiren to him.”

“What? He is interested in Song Ruhao?” Yan Ge was surprised. “When did this happen?”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “He told me today, and that’s when I found out. He has liked Song Guiren for a long time, but because of his identity as a flower bodied man, he followed the selection criteria and Yuhu never pursued it. Later, when Song Guiren was sent to the cold palace, he secretly went to see him twice, and past feelings reignited. He hopes that I can use the opportunity of dismissing the consorts to send Song Guiren out of the palace and make him a side concubine.”

“You agreed?” Yan Ge stroked the water temperature and began to undo his belt.

Before he could finish undoing his belt, Huangfu Yuchen lifted him up and lightly leaped into the pool. “I only told him that it would be feasible if he can obtain the approval of Grand Tutor Song. He said he could. Having just lost an arm, I don’t want to disappoint him again. If Grand Tutor Song agrees, I will issue the decree.”

“Can Song Ruhao agree?” Yan Ge asked.

Huangfu Yuchen shrugged. “His opinion probably won’t matter to anyone. As long as Grand Tutor Song agrees, even if he is unwilling, his father will find a way to persuade him.”

Over the next two days, Huangfu Yuchen held marriage ceremonies for the newlyweds. Although a few consorts did not have a suitor at the banquet, their families believed it would be beneficial for their reputation to have their marriages arranged during this grand occasion, and they quickly searched for suitable candidates.

For several consecutive days, the sound of firecrackers and festive trumpets could be heard throughout the capital.

Only Yan Ge, the Empress, the four consorts, and Tian Guiren remained in the harem, along with Song Ruhao in the cold palace.

Huangfu Yuchen persuaded Song Chaobang to have Song Ruhao leave the palace. However, Song Ruhao was unwilling and put up fierce resistance, even resorting to threats of suicide. In the end, Song Chaobang had no choice but to let him be.

Two days later, Du Changzai “passed away” in the cold palace.

With that, the harem affairs came to an end, and Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen could focus on the next stage of their work without worries.

After completing the plan for the renovation of the capital, Yan Ge entrusted the task to Gao Jingwei, the Minister of Works. Yan Ge would only assist as an advisor.

While waiting for an adequate supply of limestone, Yan Ge found a suitable location in the capital and began preparations to build a simple football field. He provided Gao Feng and Gao Yun with specifications for the field, including the turf, spectator stands, and other details, allowing them to take charge of the project.

A large amount of limestone and clay was quickly transported into the capital, forming small mountains. Most of the limestone came from the

Cangcui Mountain on the outskirts of the capital, while some was sourced from other regions.

The people of the capital immediately sensed that something big was about to happen in the city when they saw the arrival of the limestone. Huangfu Yuchen then issued a public announcement regarding the upcoming renovation of the capital.

In areas of the main city where the streets were less than eight meters wide and occupied by buildings, they would be demolished unless they were designated as special scenic areas. In summary, the width of the streets had to be at least eight meters.

Furthermore, the construction of new roads would consider elements such as landscaping, drainage ditches, and public toilets. The government would assess and compensate the value of the demolished houses or shops and grant priority purchasing rights to the owners in future residential and commercial areas. However, the new residential and commercial areas would be planned and sold by the government, while the actual construction would be carried out by developers.

The news of the Impending renovation of the capital caused a sensation throughout the city.

Wen Xian didn’t know if it was because of his confidence in Yan Ge or because of his keen insight. As soon as he learned the news from the imperial list, he immediately took one million taels of silver and registered with Yan Ge, securing his qualification to choose a plot of land. Many wealthy merchants in the capital followed suit. The court then used this money to compensate the displaced residents and carry out infrastructure construction.

“Yuchen, I want to show you something.” Yan Ge had a eunuch place a tray on the table and stepped back.

The tray contained several bowls, some filled with powdered clay, some with powdered limestone, and some with powdered sand…

Yan Ge mixed all the materials together, added water, and handed the chopsticks to Huangfu Yuchen. “Stir it.”

Huangfu Yuchen took the chopsticks and stirred the mixture a few times. “So?”

Yan Ge held a cup, conjured a Fire Gathering technique, and the water in the bowl quickly evaporated. The mixture dried up and changed color.

He handed the chopsticks to Huangfu Yuchen again. “Poke it.”

Huangfu Yuchen understood without needing to try. He stood up abruptly, picked up the bowl, and exclaimed, “This is what you call cement.”

“Yes,” Yan Ge said, “using cement to pave the roads guarantees that they will be smooth and solid. Unlike the current stone-paved roads that crack and become uneven with the weight of heavy carts passing over them, requiring frequent repairs, which is quite costly.”

Huangfu Yuchen hugged him tightly and said emotionally, “Baby, it’s too cheap for Great Han to have you.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?” Yan Ge was puzzled.

Huangfu Yuchen hugged him even tighter. “I mean everyone in Great Han doesn’t deserve you except me. You belong to me alone!”

Yan Ge couldn’t help but burst into laughter. “Your jealousy knows no bounds. You’re even jealous of your own country now.”

Deng Mande kept his head low, pretending not to exist.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “We must safeguard the cement formula. It will be our exclusive secret, not only for the next year or two, but even for the next ten or eight years. We will not only use cement to transform Great Han but also use it to earn wealth from other countries.”

Yan Ge gave him a thumbs-up. Truly worthy of an emperor. In less than half a minute, he already had such far-reaching plans.

Soon, a large number of laborers were employed by the court to produce various materials according to Yan Ge's requirements, such as burning limestone and grinding clay into powder. However, the final formula was kept by the court.

The invention of cement would be a significant breakthrough in architectural history.

In the initial stage of mastering this technology, Great Han would not allow it to fall into foreign hands. Therefore, the workers only had a general understanding that cement was made from limestone and clay, but they had no knowledge of the specific proportions required for the most durable cement.

Yan Caiqing was the guiding star for the merchants in the capital. When the First Company contacted several transport companies to deliver limestone to the court, they immediately saw the business opportunity and quickly hired people to transport limestone and clay from other places to the capital, selling them to the court. This greatly facilitated the work of the Ministry of Works. As a result, the capital became livelier than ever before.

"Master Gao, when do you plan to start the construction?" Yan Ge asked Gao Jingwei.

Gao Jingwei replied, "We already have about a hundred thousand catties of cement in the warehouse, and the limestone and clay are continuously being transported. We can ensure a consistent supply of cement for the near future. So, I think we can start tomorrow."

Yan Ge nodded. " Baorong Street runs from the West City Gate to the palace. It is the main street, and the most important and bustling street in the entire capital. Let's start with that street. As long as we follow my planning diagram, there shouldn't be any issues."

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Gao Jingwei said, “Then we’ll do as Yan Caiqing says. However, regarding the wages for the laborers, the Emperor said that there would be no wages provided. This way, expenses can be saved on food and drink. I also support this, but I am concerned it might cause public resentment.”

Yan Ge smiled lightly and replied, “Is the renovation of the capital city for the Emperor alone? It is for all the people in the capital. Once the streets become wider, won’t they be walking on them? It’s only right for them to contribute. As long as we explain the reasons clearly to them, I believe they will understand. If they still have objections, that’s fine. We’ll make note of their names, and they will have to pay a toll fee every time they pass through the renovated roads in the future.”

Gao Jingwei laughed and bowed, saying, “Yan Caiqing’s words are reasonable.”

Yan Ge emphasized, “But there are two points to note: first, the laborers should work in shifts to avoid excessive fatigue and harm to their health; second, each laborer’s working time should not exceed five hours in a day; third, the meals must be good, and it’s also important to provide enough cooling herbal tea. Both the Emperor and I will secretly inspect from time to time, and if we find anyone embezzling or violating the rules, they will be immediately thrown into prison without mercy. Master Gao, you must keep your subordinates in check.”

“Yes! I will remember!” Gao Jingwei solemnly replied.

Actually, Yan Ge underestimated the submissive nature of the feudal society’s common people. As soon as they heard that the court was conscripting them for labor, they had no objections. Even those who

harbored some grievances dared not voice them and buried them deep inside.

Who would dare to say anything? When they learned that they would receive three meals a day provided by the court, with each meal consisting of two meat dishes, two vegetable dishes, and refreshing herbal tea and mung bean soup to quench their thirst, any remaining discontent dissipated, and they all shouted, “Long live the Emperor!”

Although the capital city was the imperial city, not everyone there was wealthy. For ordinary people, having a meal with meat every three to five days was considered fortunate, while those in poorer households would only have meat during the Lunar New Year.

Not only did ordinary commoners participate in the road construction, but the merchants were also required to participate. Everyone over the age of eighteen couldn’t escape this duty. Scholars and officials were exempted, but some prominent businessmen who had status felt it was beneath them to participate in physically demanding road construction. In that case, they could contribute money and help the court hire an equal number of laborers. In summary, in whatever form, everyone had to contribute to the road construction.

Almost ninety-nine percent of the merchants paid to bring laborers from other regions. That was also acceptable as long as it ensured the court had enough workers.

The labor aspect proceeded smoothly, which pleasantly surprised Yan Ge and made him find the majority of the ancient common people quite adorable.

On the first day of work, Huangfu Yuchen showed up in a dragon carriage and a simple imperial guard. After the sound of firecrackers stopped, Huangfu Yuchen dug the first catalpa soil with a shovel, which means that the road construction will go smoothly.

All the people cheered loudly.

The road construction process was similar to modern times. It started with demolishing the existing stone-paved roads and removing all the broken stones. The tree planting workers were responsible for digging holes and planting trees in designated areas. The laborers in charge of constructing flower beds used bricks and cement to build them. The road construction workers started their work in the remaining spaces.

First, they mixed the pre-prepared mixture provided by the court with water and spread it on the ground to a thickness of about six inches, which was approximately twenty centimeters. Then, they smoothed the surface with an extremely smooth wooden board and waited for it to dry before people could walk on it.

“Xiao Ge, come here.” Huangfu Yuchen pulled Yan Ge over and raised his left foot, leaving a shallow imprint on the concrete, then switched to his right foot.

Yan Ge couldn’t help but laugh and raised his foot, leaving a pair of footprints next to Huangfu Yuchen’s footprints. The two pairs of footprints faced the same direction, moving in harmony.

A quick-thinking official immediately flattered, “The two pairs of footprints left by His Majesty and Yan Caiqing not only symbolize their sacred presence blessing the capital, but also represent their great achievements that will be celebrated for eternity!”

“Well said,” Huangfu Yuchen glanced at him indifferently. “Reward!”

The official was overjoyed. “Thank you, Your Majesty!”

Huangfu Yuchen still had official duties so after delivered a few inspiring words to the common people and chatting briefly with Yan Ge, he left for the palace. Yan Ge acted as his supervisor on the first day.

Once a section of the road was completed, burlap bags were laid on top. After a while, water was poured over the bags to reduce the likelihood of the road surface cracking. Pouring water over the burlap allowed the water to slowly seep in, and it didn’t need to be done too frequently.

Several women who also volunteered to help with the work inserted sticks into the soil at the side of the road and tied colorful ropes between them, forbidding pedestrians from stepping on the road surface before it dried.

“It’s so smooth,” the commoners praised. “After this, we won’t have to worry about the road being difficult to walk on when we push our carts to sell things.”

“Yes, even I have been arranged to work here in about ten days. There isn’t much work to do in the fields recently, so I think I’ll come and help. I just hope they’ll accept me,” someone agreed.

Yan Ge happened to hear this and replied, “Of course they will. The more people participate, the faster the roads will be built.”

“Really, Yan Caiqing!”

“Yes,” Yan Ge nodded. “If you want to help, you can go and register at any place where the imperial edict is posted. However, even if you work more, you will only get to eat, there won’t be any wages given.”

The middle-aged woman smiled kindly, “Since we volunteered to work, we certainly don’t want any wages. Thank you, Yan Caiqing. We’ll go now.”

“Yan Caiqing, do you know when this new road will be ready for use?” another commoner asked.

Yan Ge replied, “In the hot weather of June, it will take about four or five days for it to dry and be ready for use.”

Soldiers on patrol approached, striking a gong as they said, “The villagers who are here to watch the excitement, disperse immediately to avoid blocking the road. The villagers who are here to watch the excitement, disperse…”

The crowd of commoners gradually dispersed and continued with their own tasks.

Yan Ge went to the company and worked until lunchtime before returning to the construction site. He specifically went to inspect the lunch and found that it consisted of two meat dishes, two vegetable dishes, and it tasted quite good. He nodded in approval.

The first day of construction went very smoothly. On the second day, Yan Ge didn't go but went to the temporary football field instead. The official football field had already been built, but the transplanted grass needed more time to grow.

When Yan Caiqing initially announced the formation of a football team, many people signed up.

Gao Feng and Gao Jingwei inspected their health and physical condition according to Yan Ge's requirements and selected only fifty individuals. After preliminary training, these fifty individuals would continue to be assessed, and ultimately, only eighteen would be chosen, with eleven on the field and the remaining seven as substitutes.

Although they weren't quite sure what this football team was all about, Gao Feng and Gao Yun had mentioned that those who made the final selection would not only receive a monthly stipend but also special uniforms. As a result, the competition among the participants was fierce. No matter what they did, being selected meant glory.

When Yan Ge arrived, a match was already underway on the field. One team wore black outfits while the other wore gray. These were their own clothes for now; there were no official team uniforms. The ball they used was woven from bamboo strips.

The players were still not very familiar with the rules, and it was common for them to use their hands or hold the ball when they were in a hurry. Gao Feng and Gao Yun's whistles frequently rang out.

Yan Ge found it both amusing and helpless as he watched from the side. He had already simplified the rules as much as possible.

“Stop! Stop!” After several days of training with no improvement, Gao Yun became frustrated. “Listen up, anyone who pushes or touches the ball with their hands will receive a punishment. If you commit an offense, you’ll receive a palm strike. This is to ensure that you all learn your lesson!”

Gao Yun played the role of the stern instructor, while Gao Feng played the more lenient one. “Alright, alright, don’t worry too much. Let’s start again.”

As the whistle sounded, the match resumed. The players’ reactions seemed slightly delayed as they constantly reminded themselves not to use their hands. Some even ran with their hands behind their backs to restrain themselves. Nevertheless, the game was much more enjoyable to watch than before. After a while, the players started getting used to the prohibition on using their hands and gradually let go, increasing the pace of their competition.

After the first half, Yan Ge called Gao Feng and Gao Yun over.

“Young Master, you’re here.”

Yan Ge said, “I’ve watched them, and their skills are quite good. However, we need to make the most of our time. The capital city won’t have just our football team. Compared to the other teams, we’ve already taken the lead, and I hope they won’t disappoint me. Tomorrow, I’ll have the notice posted.”

Gao Feng replied, “Don’t worry, Young Master. After observing for three more days at most, we’ll finalize the selection.”

Yan Ge said, “Start by choosing the top thirty-six candidates. Those who aren’t selected will receive a subsidy of 500 coins each.”

“Yes.”

The next day, a large crowd gathered in front of the notice board at the entrance of the First Company. They eagerly read the announcement.

“Capital City Cup Football Tournament: To promote the spirit of sports, cooperation, and foster a sense of competition, the First Company will hold a large-scale football tournament on August 15. The top three teams will be awarded the Gold Cup, Silver Cup, and Bronze Cup as recognition. The First Company has already formed a football team called the Yunxiao Team. We welcome sports enthusiasts from the capital city to form football teams and compete with us. To provide a more visual explanation of the football tournament, two days from now, the First Company’s Yunxiao Team will have an intense competition against the Yunxiao Second Team. Everyone is welcome to come and watch. The address is as follows…”

“A football tournament? What’s football?”

“Never heard of it, but it seems interesting. We must go and watch.”

……

In the office, Yan Ge leaned over the desk and quickly wrote down the rules of the tournament. Once he finished, he would have them printed.

Deng Mande reminded him, and only then did he realize it was time to leave work. He put down his pen, stood up, and stretched lazily. “I’ll leave it to you here.”

“Don’t worry, Young Master.”

With a briefcase in hand, Yan Ge strolled leisurely towards the entrance. Not far from the gate, he saw a very handsome man with a smile on his lips, clearly waiting for him.

Feeling pleasantly surprised, he quickened his pace. “Why are you here?”

This wasn’t the first time Huangfu Yuchen had come to his company, but it was definitely the first time he waited for him after work. The feeling of being valued warmed Yan Ge’s heart.

Deng Mande opened the lid of the food box.

“I came to pick you up after work,” Huangfu Yuchen took the bag from Yan Ge’s hand and handed him the bowl of soup. “It’s hot weather, so have a bowl of mung bean soup first.”

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***Nailhouse refers to a person who refuses to vacate their home to make way for development.**

Yan Ge held the soup bowl in his hands, and the curve of his lips unconsciously widened, “Delicious. Why didn’t you disguise yourself or change clothes before coming out? It’s dangerous.”

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “If it’s delicious, drink more. Even if I change my face, others will still know it’s me. You, Boss Yan, are now a famous figure, and I’m basking in your glory.”

“That’s true,” Yan Ge smiled and finished his soup, passing the bowl to Deng Mande. “Let’s go back.”

The two of them got on the carriage, and as the curtain fell, Yan Ge hooked his arm around Huangfu Yuchen’s neck and kissed him.

Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi now had another carriage. When Yan Ge’s carriage was unavailable, they would use the other one.

“There aren’t many opportunities for my sweetheart to take the initiative to kiss me.” Huangfu Yuchen teased, deepening the passionate kiss.

During this period, both of them were busy, and they would practice for half an hour before bed every night, without fail. Usually, they would fall asleep immediately after practicing, and it had been a long time since they had

been intimate. After kissing for a while, they almost went too far before they leaned against each other to catch their breath.

“I saw the announcement outside the company earlier. The football tournament sounds interesting, and I plan to form a team as well.”

Yan Ge raised an eyebrow, “Are you thinking that no one will be interested in the tournament, and by August 15, there won’t be a second football team to compete against the Yunxiao Team, so you want to prepare a team in advance to save me?”

“Baby, your eloquence is impressive! You didn’t even pause for such a long sentence.” Huangfu Yuchen praised.

“Cut it out,” Yan Ge glanced at him, “Isn’t what I said true?”

Huangfu Yuchen touched his eyelashes, “It’s not that I don’t have confidence in you, it’s that I don’t have confidence in the people of the capital city. This is their first encounter with this new thing called football, and it might not be easy for them to accept.”

This guy really wasn’t good at comforting others. Yan Ge said, “I’ll take you to watch the match the day after tomorrow, and then you can speak.”

“Okay,” Huangfu Yuchen agreed.

After disguising themselves, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen arrived at the temporary footfield. It was already crowded with people. The perimeter of the field was cordoned off with simple railings, not allowing the spectators to get too close to avoid accidents.

Huangfu Yuchen noticed that the players on the field were wearing two different colored outfits, allowing for easy differentiation between the two teams.

“Has the match started? Why are they running so slowly?” Huangfu Yuchen was a complete novice.

Yan Ge explained, “They are warming up right now. Because playing football requires constant running on the field, and at a fast pace, it’s easy to get injured if they don’t warm up their bodies beforehand.”

After a while, the whistle sounded, and the match began.

As soon as the ball entered the field, a player from the black team reacted the quickest and ran a few steps to kick the ball towards the south goal. A player from the white team also reacted swiftly, with powerful legs, running quickly to intercept the ball and kick it towards the north goal.

And so it went, kicking towards the south, kicking towards the north, but the ball never made it into the goal.

A voice full of innocence rang out, “Papa, why are so many people fighting over one ball? Why doesn’t that uncle give them each a ball? Then they wouldn’t have to fight over it.”

The surrounding people burst into laughter.

‘Yan Jin!’ Yan Ge’s mouth twitched. ‘Can you please stop ruining your master’s image?’

Huangfu Yuchen squeezed his shoulder comfortingly.

Yan Jin was being hugged by Jiang Gan, and neither of them noticed that Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were standing nearby. Even if they noticed, they wouldn’t recognize the disguised Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

Jiang Gan said, “Having one ball for each person wouldn’t be fun. Let’s continue watching.”

At that moment, a short player from the black team made a fake move, pretending to go left but actually going right, deceiving the defender from the black team. He lifted his right foot and kicked the ball, which whizzed towards the goal. The goalkeeper from the red team crouched down, then pounced forward, intercepting the ball but missing it by inches. The ball slightly grazed his sleeve as it flew past.

Goal!

The spectators were drawn in by this series of actions and couldn't control their excitement until the ball went in. It was at that moment that they vaguely sensed the joy of football. The act of scoring a goal always brought a sense of accomplishment.

"Great!" Yan Ge exclaimed loudly.

Others also joined in, shouting their approval.

On a wooden board placed on the side, Gao Yun wrote a number "1" below the black team's flag and shouted, "The black team scores one point. The red team needs to work harder!"

Huangfu Yuchen also found it interesting, "its really interesting! Baby, did you notice that this football match is similar to a hunt?"

Yan Ge sent a telepathic message, "Clever. It is said that football was inspired by a hunting game on horseback, but it gradually evolved into a ground-based sport."

"Boss, this football is quite interesting! After watching for so long, I'm interested in playing too." Xu Yiming said to Xiao Jinran, "Why don't we form a football team as well? I have a feeling that football will become popular nationwide."

In the second half, the player from the black team who scored the first goal accidentally kicked the ball into his own goal. The referee awarded one point to the red team, and the spectators finally understood what had happened, erupting into laughter.

This football match completely ignited the interest of the common people. Yan Ge had successfully achieved his goal.

It seemed that overnight, several football teams emerged in the capital city: the Tiger Team, the Lightning Team, the Ever-Victorious Team, the Scholar Team…

Huangfu Yuchen finally felt relieved.

Football was just one of Yan Ge's hobbies. After addressing the basic issues, he handed the football team over to Gao Feng. His main interest still lay in the reconstruction of the capital city.

Imperial Study Room

"Deng Mande."

Deng Mande hurriedly walked over, "I'm here."

Huangfu Yuchen asked, "Any news from the undercover spies we sent out?"

Deng Mande replied, "Your Majesty, not yet."

"Hmm," Huangfu Yuchen fell silent for a moment. "Go and prepare. I'm going on a secret visit to see how the road construction is progressing."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

After five days of road construction, the first section was already dried under the sun for five days. People would curiously walk a few steps on it every day, marveling at it.

At the construction site, buckets of herbal tea and mung bean soup were brought over, and anyone who felt tired from working could freely go and drink. A soldier sat on one side, responsible for timing with an hourglass.

Once the time was up, they would switch shifts. Each shift changed every time the sun was at its highest point during the day. There was also a doctor on duty, ready to provide timely treatment in case of injuries or heatstroke.

Gao Jingwei and a few other government officials would inspect the site every now and then. Under the Emperor's rule, not many dared to engage in deceitful acts, especially when the road construction was beneficial to everyone. The common people were working with great enthusiasm.

“Master Gao, something has happened.” The Minister of Works wiped his sweat and hurriedly approached Gao Jingwei, informing him of the situation.

His expression didn’t indicate a major issue, so Gao Jingwei didn’t feel overly anxious and asked, “What happened?”

The Minister of Works whispered, “There’s a troublesome household living ahead. It’s just him and his mother left in the family. The road construction will occupy their house, and we had already reached an agreement with them and provided compensation. However, he has now changed his mind and refuses to let us demolish the house. He even claimed that someone had told him his house was worth more than the compensation offered and demanded an additional hundred taels of silver. At the current pace, the road will reach their doorstep in about two to three days, and if we don’t demolish the house, it will certainly affect the subsequent plans. Master Gao, what do you think?”

“Absolutely absurd. Take me there to have a look,” Gao Jingwei’s face turned grim.

“Understood.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Follow quietly.”

The group quickly walked toward the troublemaker’s house. Gao Jingwei was followed by a few curious onlookers, while Huangfu Yuchen cleverly hid behind the crowd.

“What’s the situation with this family?” Gao Jingwei asked.

The Minister of Works replied, “Ah, this Zhao Bao is a troublemaker and a gambler. It’s just him and his elderly mother left in the family. We had reached an agreement with them before, and it was clearly written that based on the value of their house and land, we would compensate them with a hundred taels of silver. This fellow spent it all in just two days. I suspect he was instigated by some bad company, which made him think that his house was worth even more.”

“This is a case of stubbornness,” Gao Jingwei said. “I want to see what he has to say.”

With that, the group arrived at Zhao Bao’s house. There was a crowd gathered at the entrance, all there to spectate. In the center stood a young man with his legs apart, arms crossed, and chin held high, displaying a domineering posture.

The Minister of Works sternly shouted, “Zhao Bao, why haven’t you come to greet the esteemed Minister Gao?”

Zhao Bao dared not defy and immediately knelt down, “This humble one greets Minister Gao.”

Gao Jingwei did not call him up. In a calm voice, he said, “Take Zhao Bao to the prison.”

Zhao Bao was shocked, “Minister Gao! This… This is an abuse of power! What crime have I committed?”

Gao Jingwei maintained a gentle tone as he patiently explained, “Let me explain. Considering how attached you are to your house, the court has decided not to occupy your land. According to the agreement, you should return the previous compensation of 100 taels of silver. However, I heard on the way here that you have already spent the entire amount. In that case, I have no choice but to send you to prison. As for your mother, rest assured that the authorities will take care of her after you are imprisoned. Now that everything has been explained clearly, take him away!”

Zhao Bao’s face turned pale. He desperately waved his hands and hurriedly retreated, “No, no, Minister Gao, please inform the court that they can continue using my house. We will move out immediately. I don’t want to go to prison!”

“Are you sure?” Gao Jingwei asked.

“Absolutely, absolutely. I will move out right away. Everything is already packed, and my mother and I will leave with our belongings.” With that, he

rushed into the house, supported his mother, and fled as if escaping.

The Minister of Works admired, “Minister Gao is truly formidable.”

Gao Jingwei addressed the common people, “Fellow citizens, road construction is a matter that benefits the nation and its people. I hope you can cooperate with the court. If you have any opinions, you may voice them. But if anyone intends to cause trouble, severe punishment awaits!”

“Yes, Minister.”

“That’s enough. You can all disperse now.” When Gao Jingwei turned around and saw Huangfu Yuchen, his expression changed. “Your Majesty! I pay my respects to Your Majesty!”

The common people rarely caught a glimpse of the emperor and respectfully knelt down, “Long live our Emperor!”

“Rise,” Emperor Huangfu Yuchen said.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Emperor Huangfu Yuchen spoke, “Minister Gao’s words just now were absolutely correct. The road construction not only benefits the nation and its people but also brings prosperity for generations to come. The reconstruction of the capital city is just the first step in the development of our great Han Kingdom. In the future, our kingdom will become even stronger, and we need the support of the people.”

“We, the common people, will definitely support!”

Suddenly, a voice filled with laugher shouted, “Long live the Emperor!”

The common people joined in, “Long live the Emperor!”

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled and looked over. The person sitting on the railing of the second floor, dressed in white, elegant and charming, and looking at him with a smile, could only be Yan Ge.

“Come here,” Huangfu Yuchen beckoned to him.

Yan Ge flew over with a whoosh and landed beside him.

“I greet Prime Minister Yan,” Yan Ge said.

“No need for formalities.”

“Why did you come here?” Huangfu Yuchen embraced Yan Ge’s waist.

Yan Ge replied, “I heard there was a troublemaker here, so I came to take a look.”

“A troublemaker? Quite accurate.” Huangfu Yuchen smiled lightly. “But Minister Gao has already dealt with it. Minister Gao has done well, and we must not underestimate any aspect of the road construction.”

“I will follow Your Majesty’s decree and assure Your Majesty of my utmost dedication,” Gao Jingwei said.

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“Baby, come to bed,” Huangfu Yuchen, dressed in casual attire, lay on the dragon bed, urging Yan Ge for the third time.

“I’m coming,” Yan Ge replied while the pen in his hand continued to move swiftly.

Huangfu Yuchen raised his hand, and the pen suddenly flew out of Yan Ge’s hand. Yan Ge’s body followed suit—but he flew towards the bed.

Huangfu Yuchen opened his arms and accurately caught him, embracing him tightly. “What are you pondering again? Leave it for tomorrow. When I returned today, I happened to see Yun Xi leaving. What did he come to see you for?”

Yan Ge said, “Didn’t we agree to take him to the amusement park? He came to urge me. Tomorrow, we’ll take him there. The children’s intellectual competition we’ve been preparing for days will begin.”

“A children’s intellectual competition?”

Yan Ge accidentally caught sight of a black robe hanging on the bedside. It resembled the attire of the shadow guards, but he didn’t pay much attention. He rolled over and lay on his side. “Let’s make some extra profit from the children and then move on to other targets.”

“Do you already have a target in mind?” Huangfu Yuchen asked.

Yan Ge shook his head. “Not yet. I can’t think of any quick money-making ideas for now.”

Huangfu Yuchen: “…” If your speed isn’t considered fast, then no one would dare to claim they are fast.

“Yuchen, think with me. What are the things people frequently use in their daily lives and cannot do without?”

“If I come up with something, will there be a reward?” Huangfu Yuchen asked.

“Definitely,” Yan Ge said.

“If I figure it out, let’s spend a day on the mountain… privately. How about that?” Huangfu Yuchen’s voice was hoarse, and the implied content was self-evident.

Yan Ge readily nodded. “Okay.”

Huangfu Yuchen then said, “There are many things people frequently use in their daily lives. Think about it. Every morning, people need to wash up. Aside from toothpaste and toothbrushes, they also use face towels and combs every day. In addition to that, men shave, and women put on makeup —”

“I’ve got it!” Yan Ge lay on top of him, continuously rubbing Huangfu Yuchen’s chin with his hand, the smile on his lips growing wider.

There were a few short stubbles on his chin that tickled when touched and Huangfu Yuchen’s heart also began to itch. He turned over and pressed Yan Ge beneath him. “Let’s talk about it tomorrow—”

In the middle of the night, a very faint sound suddenly came from outside. Although it was faint, it was clear to those with keen hearing.

Yan Ge moved slightly and Huangfu Yuchen whispered in his ear, “Baby, go back to sleep.”

He grabbed the black robe hanging on the side, put it on in an instant, and swiftly went out.

Yan Ge heard a few clashing sounds of swords and daggers outside, and after about a dozen moves, the sounds ceased. Huangfu Yuchen appeared silently.

Yan Ge opened his eyes. “Assassins? Where are the shadow guards?”

Huangfu Yuchen remained calm. “I instructed them not to appear. Whenever I fight those assassins, I make rapid progress in my martial arts.”

Poor assassins. Yan Ge patted the bed. “Go back to sleep.”

…..

After breakfast, Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, Yan Jin, and the Crown Prince set off for the amusement park. The park was bustling with crowds, mostly children under the age of ten. Today, all the park facilities were shut down, creating a quiet environment for the children’s intellectual competition. However, the shops were still open and doing a brisk business.

“Dong, dong, dong—”

The bell rang three times, and the entire venue fell silent.

The overseer used internal force to shout, “The ‘Genius Cup Children’s Intellectual Competition’ will officially begin after a stick of incense. Those who wish to participate can still register now, as registrations will not be accepted after the deadline. Children aged six and below can participate in the six-year-old group; children aged eight and below can participate in the eight-year-old group; and children aged ten and below can participate in the ten-year-old group. The older the age group, the greater the difficulty…”

The Crown Prince said, ”Father, father, I think I can participate in the eight-year-old group.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Okay.”

Yan Ge leaned close to his ear and said, “The competition in the eight-year-old group might be a bit challenging for the Crown Prince.”

Huangfu Yuchen responded calmly, “If he loses, it will serve as a lesson for him not to overestimate his abilities.”

As strict as ever. Yan Ge respected the Crown Prince’s decision. “Little Xi, have you made up your mind?”

Huangfu Yuchen intentionally didn’t lower his voice, and the Crown Prince heard it clearly. He changed his statement, “I’ll participate in the six-year-old group.”

“Why?” Huangfu Yuchen asked.

The Crown Prince replied, “If I win, it means the competition in the six-year-old group is too easy for me. I’ll participate in the eight-year-old group next time.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, indicating that the answer was somewhat satisfactory. Then he gave the Crown Prince an alias, Yang Fan, and took him to register. The four of them waited in the lounge for the competition to begin.

The bell rang once again.

The host’s voice rang out, “The competition is about to begin. To ensure fairness and impartiality, I kindly request that the adults refrain from providing any form of assistance or reminders to the young contestants. Violating this rule will not only result in disqualification from the current competition but also a six-month ban from entering the amusement park. I reiterate once again, to ensure fairness and impartiality…”

This punishment was quite severe for children who were accustomed to the amusement park. None of the parents dared to break the rules knowingly, as they won’t be able to explain it to their children.

“The first round is for the six-year-old group. Participants, please enter when your name is called… Yang Fan…”

Since children under six were too young, they were allowed to be accompanied by one parent. Huangfu Yuchen had no intention of going, nor did he let Yan Ge go.

The Crown Prince, on the other hand, showed no stage fright at all. After bowing to Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, he entered with the other contestants. He exuded an air of nobility fitting for a royal prince. In this group consisting of twenty participants, he stood the straightest and appeared the most relaxed.

“Look, the most elegant one is my little brother. Look how amazing he is!” Yan Jin boasted to the people nearby.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen pretended not to be associated with him.

An uncle actually struck up a conversation with the child. “You’re about the same age as your little brother. Why don’t you participate in the competition?”

Yan Jin showed off, “I’m too intelligent. If I participated, it would be unfair to the question-setters.”

Yan Ge rubbed his temples.

Several adults burst into laughter.

“Look, the competition is starting.”

“The first round is to assemble a square using Tangram puzzles. The ten fastest participants will advance.”

The Crown Prince was already well-acquainted with Tangram puzzles, so he quickly completed the task.

The host extended his hand to guide him down.

“No need, I will go by myself,” the young prince waved his hand and stood aside.

The host struggled to hold back his laughter.

“For the second challenge, take out the ball from the jar,” the host uncovered the cloth on the table. On the ground, there was a water jar about the same height as the children, and inside the jar was a ball made of pig bladder. The available tools were a fist-sized stone, a bamboo pole, a bucket of water, a bouquet of flowers, and even two plates of delicious snacks.

Blowing air into a cleaned pig bladder and playing with it was a common game among children. Yan Ge was a bit worried because it seemed that the young prince had never seen it before and might not even recognize it.

Two of the children were attracted by the snacks and thought they were prepared for them. They picked up a piece and started eating. Their father couldn’t remind them, so he stood aside, feeling both amused and embarrassed.

The audience burst Into laughter.

The other two children picked up the bamboo pole and played with it inside the jar. One of the children climbed on the edge of the jar, trying hard to climb up, but there was nowhere to step on, so after struggling for a while without success, they became anxious and scratched their head, looking adorable and amusing the people around them.

“Only you can come up with such creative ideas,” Huangfu Yuchen chuckled and said to Yan Ge.

The young prince picked up the stone and hit the jar a few times, but the jar remained sturdy. He stood still for a moment, then took a ladle and started scooping water into the jar. The other child seemed to understand and also grabbed a ladle. As the water level rose, the “ball” floated up as well.

Applause erupted from many parents, “Well done!”

Among the crowd, there was a young man dressed in brocade who didn’t seem like someone accompanying a child or participating in the competition. He said to another man with a black beard, “Yan Caiqing’s

every move has brought enormous profits. We businessmen practically follow his lead. However, this time it's a bit strange. Although there are many participants in this children's intellectual competition, the tickets for children cost twenty coins, and for adults, it's only fifty coins. The registration fee is also twenty coins. Today's total profit is probably just average."

The man with the black beard pondered for a moment. "Perhaps this competition is just for the sake of attracting more people to bring their children to the amusement park."

"Is that so?" The young man in brocade neither agreed nor refuted.

Wei Jushen, who happened to overhear their conversation, had the same question. He couldn't help but ask Wen Xian beside him, "Wen Xian, I also find it a bit strange."

Wen Xian gestured with his eyes, and the two of them squeezed out of the crowd, walking leisurely ahead.

It was only then that Wen Xian said, "Just think about Boss Yan's identity, and you'll understand the reason behind it."

"Boss Yan's identity is naturally Yan Caiqing," Wei Jushen didn't understand.

Wen Xian shook his head and hinted, "Think about the rumors of the recent civil service examination reform and the recent road construction measures. If my guess is correct, this competition is not only for amusement but also for cultivating talent. If these children's intelligence can be developed and guided through various competitions, they will undoubtedly excel in the future. Yan Caiqing, as the emperor's consort, is not only working for the First Company but also helping the emperor develop the Great Han Kingdom. It's truly fortunate to have such a consort for the Great Han Kingdom." He couldn't help but sigh.

Wei Jushen suddenly realized, "I see."

“When it comes to national affairs, it’s best to avoid too much discussion,” Wen Xian reminded him. “Those two people just now sounded like businessmen, but I’ve never seen them before.”

Wei Jushen nodded in understanding.

In the end, the “Genius Cup” in the toddler group was won by the Crown Prince. On the way back to the palace, although he still had a serious expression on his face, both Yan Ge and Yan Jin could tell that his steps were lighter than usual. The atmosphere was filled with his suppressed joy, amusing both of them.

Acting like a loving father, Huangfu Yuchen passed by a fruit tea shop and bought two cups of watermelon iced tea, one for the young crown prince and one for Yan Jin.

“Thank you, Father,” the crown prince and Yan Jin said simultaneously.

Yan Ge gently patted their heads.

On the street, passersby couldn’t help but admire the harmony of this family of four.

The crown prince and Yan Jin walked ahead, while Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen followed behind.

“Baby, I feel that my realm has loosened a bit these days. How about you?” Huangfu Yuchen transmitted his voice.

Yan Ge replied, “I feel the same. I sensed it when I first returned to the palace, but such a thing cannot be forced. It can only be accumulated gradually. Now, it should have settled down.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “After this promotion , we will enter the stage of spiritual cultivation. Once we reach the end of that stage, it won’t be a problem for our bodies even if we don’t eat the five grains.”

Yan Ge responded, “I really can’t bear to give up so many delicious foods. Anyway , you should arrange your matters first, and we will enter seclusion

as soon as possible.”

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The scenery at Mingxia Mountain remained as picturesque as ever.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen entered the mountain cave. After concealing the entrance, they wasted no time and sat cross-legged. They operated their true qi according to their cultivation methods and soon entered a state of selflessness. Their flesh and blood occasionally turned transparent, and the spiritual energy in the mountain flowed through their meridians without interruption, shimmering like countless bright lights along the way. It quickly filled every vein in their bodies, gathering in their dantian. The tiny spark in their dantian gradually grew larger, and true qi circulated continuously through the small and large heavenly circuits.

Yan Ge's body unknowingly became lighter and slowly floated in the air. The spiritual energy gathered swiftly, enveloping him like white mist. After a moment, it began to descend, creating a pit on the ground. Shortly after, it started to rise again…

Huangfu Yuchen's body became heavier and heavier, pressing the ground and forming a large pit beneath him. The spiritual energy flickered like faint electric currents, spinning rapidly around him. As time passed, it encased him in a white, giant, pointed cocoon. After a while, the cocoon also rose to the air.

The entire mountain cave was filled with heavy spiritual energy. The Zhantian Vine jumped down from Yan Ge's head, rolled on the ground, and slowly grew in size. It expanded until it was as thick as a water barrel, resembling a green python quietly coiling around Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. If observed closely, one would notice every part of its body trembling slightly. The spiritual energy fell on its branches and leaves like

tiny dust particles, ultimately descending like snowflakes onto a water's surface, blending into it…

"Boom!"

Under the pitch-black night sky, a muffled sound suddenly came from Mingxia Mountain. Two figures flew out from the mountain, wielding their swords and attacking each other. The sword blades were cold and fierce, surrounded by swirling gusts of wind, akin to two flashes of lightning, fiercely clashing against each other.

"Crack!" Another loud noise reverberated through the night sky.

The loud bang awakened the sleeping townspeople in the city. Rubbing their eyes, they walked out onto the streets and gazed at Mingxia Mountain. "So, it was just thunder…" they murmured before returning to their beds, continuing their deep slumber.

On the mountain, Yan Ge's true qi surged, and his body became as light as a falling leaf. He swung his spiritual sword, releasing a burst of sword energy. His power was capable of withstanding a thousand soldiers. Huangfu Yuchen stood still like Mount Tai, blocking the sword strike with an imposing force comparable to a mighty thunderstorm.

After exchanging several moves, the two men stopped simultaneously and smiled at each other.

"I didn't expect our gains from this seclusion to be so great. We have both reached the middle of the Golden Core stage in one fell swoop," Yan Ge said. "However, it seems that your true qi carries a hint of thunder and lightning."

Huangfu Yuchen replied, "It's probably due to the previous strike from the Zhantian Vine. Nonetheless, this power is beneficial to me and has no drawbacks."

"Oh, speaking of Zhantian Vine, where is it?" Yan Ge scratched his head.

The Zhantian Vine lazily flew in front of him, its body had grown as large as a python. It descended to the position of Yan Ge's knee and shook its "head" at him.

"Yuchen, it wants us to get on it. Haha, let's experience the feeling of riding on a dragon!"

The two of them mounted Zhantian Vine. It flew smoothly and swiftly, disappearing into the night sky in an instant…

Ministry of Works

"When shaving, follow the formula I provided," Yan Ge instructed several officials from the Ministry of Industry. "And make sure to sharpen the razors to a high degree of smoothness."

"Yes," the officials replied.

Yan Ge continued, "For tasks that the ministry cannot handle, they can be delegated to some merchants. However, three-tenths of the profits should go to the ministry, and one-tenth to the First Company. Even if they only earn sixty percent, it is still profitable. We should not only sell within the country but also to foreigners. In short, we should try our best to earn money from foreigners. Understood?"

One official said, "No problem. However, if we sell to foreigners, they will surely imitate our razors." Under Yan Ge's influence, he referred to people from other kingdoms as "foreigners."

"No worries," Yan Ge confidently stated. "The razors are easy to imitate, but the shaving foam is not."

"I understand. I will take care of it."

Yan Ge left the Ministry of Industry with his briefcase. Passing by Liuxian Pavilion, he saw several familiar-looking individuals at the entrance. He used his spiritual qi to probe inside Liuxian Pavilion and saw the presence of Yinsha, the leader of the Luna Worshiping Sect. Suddenly, he

remembered something and quickly contacted Huangfu Yuchen using his consciousness.

“Yuchen, it seems like we forgot something. Our appointment with Yinsha!”

“Has he arrived? I’ll come over and meet you right away.”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen assumed the identities of Luo Fang and Zhang Yang as they entered Liuxian Pavilion.

The gloomy aura emanating from Yinsha was so heavy that no one dared to sit at the four tables adjacent to his.

“Master Yin.” Huangfu Yuchen spoke first.

Yinsha glanced at him and Yan Ge, “You’re very trustworthy.”

Huangfu Yuchen said: “Let’s talk in another place, please follow me.”

The three sat down in the private room.

Yan Ge said: “Master Yin should actually thank us for the matter of Fancheng.”

Yinsha said: “You stole the sacrifice of our sect, and we should thank you?”

Yan Ge said, “Of course. Do you know why we stole the other sacrificial offering? It was because he intended to harm the Holy Maiden.”

“I see. Thank you,” Yinsha replied flatly.

Surprisingly, Yinsha believed them without suspicion and even expressed gratitude. Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen exchanged glances. The leader of the Luna Worshipping Sect turned out to be so accommodating, contrary to the rumors.

Yinsha continued, “But the fact remains that you disrupted the ritual.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “I heard that your sect worships the moon every year to seek a rise in status and a smooth year ahead. Is that true or not?”

Yinsha nodded.

Huangfu Yuchen added, “Even so, I present this to you.” He reached out his hand, and a pearl-like object formed by condensing spiritual qi rolled and stopped in the middle of the table. It was deadly to ordinary people but served as excellent medicine for cultivators.

“It’s clear that Master Yin’s cultivation has reached a bottleneck. This object can help you break through,” Huangfu Yuchen said. “Once Master Yin’s martial arts reach a higher level, your status in the martial world will soar. Other martial artists will fear and respect you more, and the operations of the Luna Worshipping Sect will naturally go smoothly. What do you think, Master Yin?”

Yinsha fell silent for a moment, then nodded. “Let’s drop that matter then. However, you must fight me.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “You’re not my match.”

Yinsha didn’t get angry and maintained his rigid expression. “Only by fighting will we know. He can also do.” He pointed at Yan Ge.

Yan Ge was puzzled. Yinsha had witnessed Yuchen’s extraordinary power when they were in Bazu County. He should know that he was no match for Yuchen, so why insist on a fight? Perhaps it was a common problem among martial artists.

“In that case, please,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

The three of them disappeared, reappearing on a sparsely populated street on the outskirts. It seemed that martial artists in the capital were generally reluctant to interact with people from the court, so there weren’t many martial artists in the city. Unfortunately, they would miss this exciting duel.

Huangfu Yuchen and Yinsha faced each other from a distance. A gust of wind blew, causing the grass to bow and the fallen leaves to dance in the air. However, the clothes of the two remained motionless in the wind. The tense and murderous aura rippled through the air above the grassland.

Yet, Yan Ge unintentionally added a touch of humor to the atmosphere by lifting his clothes and casually sitting on a large rock.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Since Master Yinsha challenged me, please go ahead.”

Yinsha cupped his hands and rushed a few steps toward Huangfu Yuchen. He leaped with his legs, resembling a black tiger suddenly spotting its prey, and his claws reached out, aiming for Huangfu Yuchen’s left neck and right abdomen. Swift as lightning, his figure left afterimages, and his black cloak moved like a dark cloud, constantly shifting.

As an emperor, Huangfu Yuchen had not engaged in many personal battles. Yinsha’s challenge provided him with an excellent opportunity to gain combat experience. Without immediately activating his true qu, he displayed remarkable speed. His black figure appeared and disappeared like he was about to brush past Yinsha. Both his arms rose simultaneously, blocking Yinsha’s attacks. At the moment their four arms collided, both of them trembled slightly, confirming that the other’s strength was indeed formidable.

After the collision, they both retreated. Huangfu Yuchen no longer gave Yinsha the opportunity to attack first. He swiftly charged toward Yinsha, gathering his strength into his right hand and delivering a powerful blow.

Yinsha quickly pushed out his palm, his footwork resembling that of a ghost as he attacked while spinning erratically around Huangfu Yuchen. His speed was astonishing, as if there were multiple versions of himself surrounding Huangfu Yuchen.

With a glint in his eyes, Huangfu Yuchen defended while sharply observing his surroundings. With arms swirling in opposite directions, he launched a

vortex-like attack. With a loud bang, his fist struck Yinsha's left shoulder blade.

Yinsha's strength was indeed formidable. Although the impact of the punch caused him to slide nearly ten meters backward, his expression remained unchanged, as if he felt no pain. With a "swoosh," he drew his sword and thrust it toward Huangfu Yuchen, displaying countless variations in his sword techniques — chaotic as a waterfall cascading from a cliff, tumultuous like a gust of wind scattering leaves.

Huangfu Yuchen also unsheathed his sword. With the Flowing Sands Sword Technique, he unleashed a sandstorm that swept up the air and filled the sky with sword energy. The wild and chaotic storm penetrated Yinsha's defenses from all directions.

Yinsha's right arm trembled, and he transformed into an arrow, shooting toward Huangfu Yuchen. Huangfu Yuchen leaped into the air, spun around, and his sword blade brushed across Yinsha's arm, picking up a piece of cloth from his cloak. Huangfu Yuchen landed two feet away, calmly looking at Yinsha.

Yinsha's gaze drifted over the torn cloth. "You win."

Before Huangfu Yuchen could respond, Yinsha flew into the air, heading towards the direction of the capital.

"Baby, let's return as well," Huangfu Yuchen said as he approached Yan Ge. "I rushed here from the military camp, and I'm afraid they might be looking for me by now."

Yan Ge asked, "How is the training of the Imperial Guards?"

Huangfu Yuchen replied, "The military book you provided is extremely valuable. Their progress is remarkable, and in a few days, they will be divided into two armies to conduct exercises on both sides of the Jing River. Are you interested in going to see it together?"

"Of course!" Yan Ge's interest was piqued.

“I will take you there when the time comes.”

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Huangfu Yuchen said that the military exercise would last for a total of five days.

Yan Ge arranged the affairs of the company within three days, and made another visit to the clothing store.

A child was suddenly pushed into the middle of the road and fell heavily on the ground, blocking Yan Ge's path. A bun stained with dirty handprints rolled into the ditch by the roadside.

"Huh? How can you do such a thing to a small child?" Yan Ge looked at the owner of the bun shop.

When the bun shopkeeper saw him, he quickly bowed, "Yan Caiqing, it was a moment of haste on my part. You see, this little beggar has been staying at my bun shop for several days. I'm kind enough to give him two big buns for every meal, but I can't keep supporting him indefinitely, can I? Today, I didn't give him any buns, and unexpectedly, he resorted to grabbing it."

The child got up and hid behind Yan Ge, looking timidly at the shopkeeper and whispered, "I'm hungry…"

Listening to the voice, it sounded more like a girl. Yan Ge looked at Du Juan, "If I remember correctly, the emperor issued a decree before the New Year to provide employment opportunities for beggars in the capital. Those who are physically disabled and unable to support themselves should be taken care of by relief houses. What's the matter with this child?"

Du Juan said, "Young master, you remember correctly. This child probably came from outside. I'll ask around and find out."

The child appeared to be about eight or nine years old, with relatively clear speech. It turned out that she had been kidnapped by human traffickers and had only just managed to escape from their clutches. She had walked for several days along the official road before reaching the capital. She knew her parents' names and that they lived in a place called Liushui Village, but she didn't know where exactly this Liushui Village was.

"I see. Du Juan, take her to the relief house," Yan Ge said in a low voice. "Make sure someone there takes care of her, as she seems to be a little girl."

"Yes, I will do so."

After inspecting the construction site, Yan Ge returned to the company and found a delicate little girl sitting in the lobby. Upon closer inspection, she was none other than the beggar girl from before. She was indeed a girl.

"What's going on?" Yan Ge asked.

Du Juan bowed and apologized, "Please forgive me, young master. I took her to the relief house, but I hadn't gone far when this little girl…"

"Young master." Deng Mama called out, seeming to have something to say.

Yan Ge gestured for her to follow him outside.

"Deng Mama, what's the matter?"

Deng Mama hesitated for a moment, "This servant thinks it would be best for the young master to investigate who this girl really is."

"Could it be that Deng Mama has discovered something unusual?" Yan Ge's expression became cold. As someone in the palace and the emperor's "favorite consort" in the eyes of outsiders, he developed a sense of vigilance. He would not ignore the potential threat posed by the girl just because she was a child.

Deng Mama said, "I'm not sure why, but this servant feels that this child looks somewhat familiar, as if I had seen her somewhere before."

“I see. Deng Mama, if you can remember when you saw her, perhaps we can help her find her family.”

Deng Mama shook her head, “Perhaps I accidentally saw her once before. I can’t recall.”

“In that case, we’ll have to keep her here for the time being.”

After Yan Ge left, Deng Mama pondered for a while but still couldn’t remember where she had seen the little girl before, so she had to give up.

“What’s your name, little sister?” Du Juan asked.

The little girl was a little nervous due to the unfamiliar surroundings, and she took a moment before answering, “Tong Yiyi.”

“So, your name is Yiyi,” Du Juan said. “Just settle down here for now, but remember not to disturb others while they work.”

Tong Yiyi bit her lip. “Will you send me away? He saved me, and he must be a good person. Can I stay with him?”

Du Juan shook her head with a wry smile. “No, you can’t. It’s the same living here. Don’t worry, no one will bully you here.”

“Then, will you give me to someone else?” Tong Yiyi clasped her clothes and whispered, tears silently streaming down her cheeks.

Du Juan didn’t know what to say for a moment. While she sympathized with the little girl, the headquarters was a sensitive place and involved many confidential matters. Not everyone could stay here for a long time.

“Don’t think too much for now. I’ll have someone bring you some food.”

……

Perhaps all emperors were the same, prioritizing military matters above all else, and Huangfu Yuchen was no exception. In his and Yan Ge’s development plan, the military and economy were given top priority. Yan

Ge served as an economic advisor while Huangfu Yuchen oversaw the military. The defense of the capital was of utmost importance, and the Imperial Guards had the responsibility to safeguard the royal family's security. To counter internal conflicts and defend against external enemies, they became the first to undergo training based on the military book provided by Yan Ge.

The Imperial Guards consisted of thirty thousand soldiers. Except for the necessary troops that couldn't be withdrawn from guarding the city, all other soldiers were divided into two armies through a lottery system. Everything was conducted as a formal battle, even including the logistics of food and supplies.

Due to the limited time for the military exercise, and the need to not waste too much food, it would only last for five days. The lottery determined which side would be the enemy and which side would defend the capital. The Jing River run east to west and lay south of the capital. The enemy soldiers wore a red cloth band on their left wrists and camped in Henan, while the defending soldiers camped in Hebei.

When Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen arrived, the enemy and defending forces faced each other across the river. Both sides had set up dozens of tents and lit campfires. The tall war drums were also placed.

From a distance, they could see a team of soldiers guarding the bridge checkpoint, another team guarding the food supplies, and a third team patrolling. The remaining soldiers were resting in their tents, making the most of their time. Considering that too much food couldn't be wasted, the military exercise lasted for only five days, and the food was genuine. The enemy soldiers could only attack the city by crossing the checkpoint five miles away from the South Gate. To win, they had to capture the flag planted there.

Huangfu Yuchen asked Yan Ge, "Which side do you want to observe?"

Yan Ge replied, "What do you think?"

Huangfu Yuchen didn’t hesitate, “The enemy side. I’m curious to see if they can break through the checkpoint and enter the capital.”

“Exactly, that way we can better identify our weaknesses,” Yan Ge said.

Huangfu Yuchen showed his golden medal to the commanding officers of the Imperial Guards, and he and Yan Ge crossed the bridge.

Sun Yingxiong, the Right Commander of the Imperial Guards, said to Zhang Yingjie, the Left Commander, “Your Majesty and Yan Caiqing wouldn’t join forces with the enemy against us, would they?”

Zhang Yingjie was a clever and petite man, he whispered, “I dare not guess His Majesty’s intentions. But Yan Caiqing is very unpredictable. I think he might actually support the enemy against us because it would be more interesting.”

These Left and Right Commanders were the main leaders of the defending forces, while Yang Zhuo, the overall Commander, led the enemy forces.

Sun Yingxiong’s face changed, as if facing a formidable enemy. “I think we should do our best to improve our current battle plan.”

“Agreed,” Zhang Yingjie nodded.

Across the river, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were led by a soldier to the tent of the enemy’s main commander, Yang Zhuo.

In the center of the tent, there was a table with a large sand table placed on it. Yang Zhuo was discussing matters with two deputy commanders, Jun Xiang and Ah Fei, as well as two captains.

They quickly saluted Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge, “We pay our respects to Your Majesty and Yan Caiqing!”

Huangfu Yuchen raised his hand, “No need for formalities. We are only here to observe. Please continue your discussions as if we weren’t here.”

“We shall comply with your orders.”

Yang Zhuo and his men continued their discussion, while Yan Ge curiously examined the sand table. The situation on the table was clear at a glance, with the Jing River marked as the main feature. The three main roads leading southeast, south, and southwest were also marked. The mountains, rivers, and roads were realistically depicted.

Jun Xiang spoke first, “We received the same training, and their alertness has increased just like ours. Their arrangements at the bridge checkpoint, the narrowest section of the river, and the food supplies should be similar to ours. It’s difficult to break through in these three areas. Moreover, they have an advantage over us in terms of food supplies. Even if we manage to burn their supplies, they can replenish them from the city in time.”

Yang Zhuo and the others nodded.

At that moment, a loud shout came from the other side of the river, “Yang Zhuo! Come out and meet your death if you dare!”

A soldier hurriedly entered the tent, “Reporting to the General, Deputy Commander Qin Sanyou is issuing a challenge!”

“I heard it myself,” Yang Zhuo said. “You may withdraw.”

“Yes, General.”

Jun Xiang spoke first, “General, we should remain cautious. Our forces and theirs are facing each other across the river. If we engage in battle, should the General go over there or should Qin Sanyou come over here? We can’t just fight on the bridge, can we?”

“Yes, General. As the main commander, you should not easily enter the battle. It might be better for a subordinate to go and respond first,” Ah Fei said.

Yang Zhuo said, “Even if it’s a trap, we need to test it to uncover their next plan. Ah Fei, you go. Be careful.”

“Yes, General!”

Yan Ge watched on with great admiration. Soldiers were soldiers, quickly getting into the right mindset. They used to be comrades, but now they were enemies.

Ah Fei held his sword and went out, followed by Yang Zhuo and Jun Xiang. Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen followed from behind.

On the other side of the river, a burly and rugged man, holding a thick iron rod in one hand and with the other on his waist, stood like a door god, his fierce eyes fixed on this side.

Ah Fei shouted, “Deputy Commander Lu Fei is here to accept the challenge!”

Qin Sanyou raised his booming voice, “I want to fight Yang Zhuo! Is he too afraid to come out?”

Ah Fei smiled, “With just you, you’re not qualified to fight our main commander! Provocation won’t work on us. Will you fight or not? If not, I will start.”

Jun Xiang introduced the situation to Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge, “Your Majesty, Yan Caiqing, Qin Sanyou has immense strength, capable of smashing a big pit with a single punch. His weapon, ‘Rod of Deadly Strikes,’ is made of refined iron, weighing eighty catties. Ordinary people can’t even lift it.”

Qin Sanyou shouted, “Fine! You’ll do! But I bet you won’t dare come over here. We’ll fight on the bridge. How about that?”

“If you won’t come over here, I’ll play with you on the bridge!” Ah Fei had extraordinary courage. He leaped onto the water’s surface and landed in the middle of the bridge.

Despite weighing 180 catties, Qin Sanyou’s lightness skill was not inferior. He swiftly ran a few steps and also stood on the bridge. He didn’t say a word, but his Rod of Deadly Strikes swept horizontally towards Ah Fei,

creating a powerful gust of wind. Ah Fei leaped lightly, crouching on the stone railing, drew his sword, and advanced to meet the attack.

Both of them were skilled, and neither held back. As a result, the railing of the stone bridge was damaged in several places.

Yan Ge watched with great interest, while Huangfu Yuchen remained silent. They were just spectators for now.

Yang Zhuo couldn’t figure it out, “What are they really up to?”

Captain Luo said, “I can’t figure it out either. Maybe they’re just testing our strength?”

Captain Liu had a different opinion, “There’s no need for that. Although it’s a performance, they are familiar with each other’s abilities. There’s no need for further testing, right?”

Jun Xiang said, “Could it be a diversionary tactic? Right now, everyone’s attention is on Ah Fei and Qin Sanyou. Could the other side take the opportunity to sneak across the river from another location and catch us off guard?”

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Yang Zhuo shook his head, “That’s not possible either. We have arranged patrols along the riverbank, and if there’s any movement, there will definitely be smoke signals. Besides, Zhang Yingjie is always full of tricks; he must have other plans. Send the order to closely monitor any activity along the riverbank.”

“Yes!”

“Boom!”

Qin Sanyou’s heavy blow landed on the water, creating waves that soared three feet high. Ah Fei was struck and fell towards the bridge below, causing Jun Xiang’s expression to tense.

However, Ah Fei reached out and grabbed the railing, flipped back up and returned to the bridge with a loud roar. His Flying Shadow Kick caught Qin Sanyou off guard.

Qin Sanyou, being heavy in weight and armed with a heavy weapon, was hit with eighty percent of Ah Fei’s strength. He flipped over the railing, falling into the water with a “boom.”

Ah Fei smiled faintly.

After a moment, a person surfaced from the water. Qin Sanyou glanced at him and said, “Consider yourself the winner.”

After speaking, he submerged into the water again and resurfaced after a while, swimming towards the shore. It seemed that his weapon had fallen to the riverbed and he couldn’t find it at the moment.

The morale of Yang Zhuo's side soared. The soldiers raised their long spears and shouted in unison. "Roar! Roar! Roar!"

Yang Zhuo asked Jun Xiang, "Is there anything unusual along the riverbank?"

"No," Jun Xiang replied.

Yang Zhuo turned to leave, and someone rushed out from the opposite side.

"Yang Zhuo! If you have the courage, come out and die!"

"It seems I have to take the field," Yang Zhuo vaguely understood that the other side was still using the provocation strategy, "Jun Xiang, you go. The rest of you, return to the military tent with me."

Yan Ge remained in place, rubbing his chin and pondering something. Huangfu Yuchen didn't ask, standing beside him.

"Yuchen, it seems to me that the other side is using a chain strategy. But I can't figure out the details for the time being," Yan Ge said.

Huangfu Yuchen smiled and didn't answer, "Perhaps."

After three rounds of competition, Yang Zhuo's side won two rounds, gaining even greater momentum.

Ah Fei reminded, "Soldiers, it's highly likely that the enemy intentionally let us win two rounds to try and deceive us. We must not let our guard down!"

"Yes!"

After a day of discussion, Yang Zhuo and the others finally finalized their battle plan and launched an attack after dark.

The campfires were lit before the sun set. Smoke from the opposite side also billowed into the sky.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had a satisfying meal from a large pot, which tasted good.

“Report.”

“What’s the matter?” Yang Zhuo put down his chopsticks.

The messenger said, “Reporting to the General, the enemy has completely withdrawn their forces from the bridgehead position.”

“What?” Yang Zhuo was greatly puzzled, “Are you sure?”

The messenger said, “There are hardly any tall clusters of trees on the opposite side. We can clearly see from here, and indeed, the enemy has withdrawn all their forces.”

Yang Zhuo said, “They withdrew their forces before it was completely dark. It’s obvious that they wanted us to discover this. Could it be that they want to lure us across the bridge and then ambush us? Clever! This must be Zhang Yingjie’s idea. I underestimated this kid!”

Jun Xiang still couldn’t figure it out, “General, what exactly is going on?”

Yang Zhuo didn’t answer but instead asked, “Jun Xiang, do you think it’s better for us to cross the bridge or not?”

Jun Xiang said, “This… it’s difficult to decide. If we cross the bridge, we will undoubtedly suffer heavy losses. But if we don’t cross, it seems a bit of a pity. After all, it’s an opportunity. If we were to cross the river, it would be difficult and slow.”

Suddenly, Ah Fei’s eyes lit up, “I remember now. Perhaps Qin Sanyou deliberately fell into the river earlier, just to tamper with something under the bridge! And the challenges from Er Hu and Ma Biao were just to confuse our vision!”

Yang Zhuo said, “Correct. This is Yingjie’s intention, neither allowing us to cross nor forbidding us. To be on the safe side, we can temporarily refrain from crossing the bridge.”

Everyone suddenly understood.

“General, what should we do now?” Captain Liu asked.

Yang Zhuo smiled confidently, “It’s easy. We’ll use a strategy within a strategy. Send the order to withdraw all our troops.”

Yan Ge was surprised and looked at Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen shook his head slightly, indicating for him to continue watching.

Captain Liu hesitated, “The terrain on our side of the bridgehead is more open, and there isn’t a suitable place to ambush.”

Yang Zhuo said, “Who said we’re going to ambush? We’re really withdrawing.”

“General!” Jun Xiang, Captain Liu, and Captain Luo were all shocked at the same time.

Yang Zhuo said confidently, “Completely withdraw, immediately. After it’s completely dark, only one person will secretly return and hide in the trees.”

Ah Fei took the order and left.

Jun Xiang asked in confusion, “General, if we withdraw our forces, won’t it leave us vulnerable to a sudden attack?”

Yang Zhuo said, “Zhang Yingjie definitely won’t dare to cross the bridge, at least not for the next two days. Because he will also suspect that I’m imitating his tricks.”

Yan Ge nodded secretly. What a psychological battle!

After dark, Yang Zhuo issued the first command, “Jun Xiang, immediately lead a thousand infantry quietly to the nearest village and buy live fish, at least five hundred. You have one hour.”

“Yes!”

———

Inside the main general’s tent, Sun Yingxiong, Zhang Yingjie, and their four subordinates were all awake. The military exercise only lasted for five days, so the possibility of the enemy launching an attack on the first day was very high.

“Yingjie, do you think there are troops guarding the bridgehead on the opposite side?” Sun Yingxiong asked.

Zhang Yingjie smiled bitterly and shook his head, “Can’t be certain. I didn’t expect such a good plan to end up trapping ourselves.”

Sun Yingxiong said, “What if we send a small squad to probe?”

“Not a good idea,” Zhang Yingjie said, “If we send someone to probe, it’s equivalent to telling the enemy that we haven’t arranged too many troops here. If they have made arrangements on their side, they will immediately launch an attack from the bridge. The current situation is that neither side dares to cross the bridge.”

“Report!”

“How’s the situation?” Sun Yingxiong asked.

The messenger said, “The enemy has just extinguished all their campfires.”

“Oh?” Sun Yingxiong said, “It seems they are preparing to attack. Send the order to prepare for battle!”

“Yes!”

“Wait,” Zhang Yingjie stopped the messenger, “General Sun, I’m afraid we also need to extinguish our campfires. Otherwise, our situation will be completely exposed under the light.”

“That makes sense,” Sun Yingxiong gave the order, and then added, “Fortunately, the moonlight is still good tonight. Send the order to closely monitor the movements of several locations that are most likely to be attacked.”

“Yes.”

After a moment, a report came from outside the tent:

“First attack point report—”

“Speak.” Sun Yingxiong swung on his war robe and spoke in a deep voice.

The messenger said, “Through the Thousand-Mile Eye, we discovered a large number of soldiers approaching from the water.”

“How many of them?” Zhang Yingjie quickly asked.

The messenger replied, “At least a thousand.”

Before Sun Yingxiong could speak, another report came from a distance: “Second attack point report—”

“Speak.”

“There are a large number of soldiers approaching from the water on the opposite side. Roughly estimated to be at least a thousand.”

“Third attack point report—”

On Yang Zhuo’s side, soldiers stood ready in formation, waiting for Yang Zhuo’s command to act.

Yan Ge transmitted a message to Huangfu Yuchen’s consciousness, “As the leader of the Shadow Guard, Yang Zhou deserves a lot of credit. He came up with the idea of wrapping live fish in soldiers’ clothing and using bait to attract the fish to swim across the river, creating the illusion of a thousand soldiers crossing. In reality, there are only four or five men throwing bait

ahead. The enemy on the other side must think they want to divide and conquer.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, “This diversionary tactic is indeed well-executed. I wonder if the enemy can respond.”

After waiting for a while, Yang Zhuo spoke in a low voice, “Advance swiftly and silently!”

The main force quickly moved in the direction of the bridge.

After crossing the bridge, they found that there were only a hundred soldiers ambushed on the other side. Jun Xiang and A Fei exchanged a smile.

Yang Zhuo continued to give orders, “Continue forward and directly attack the enemy camp!”

Meanwhile, the commotion in the water was getting closer to the defenders’ bank. Sun Yingxiong and Zhang Yingjie realized that they had been deceived this time, as they only captured four or five soaking wet enemy soldiers. The commotion they heard was just the soldiers’ clothing floating in the water! However, at this point, their force of nearly fifteen thousand had dispatched about ten thousand soldiers to eight suspected attack points! In other words, their camp was virtually empty to the enemy!

“Urgent orders! Recall half of the troops sent to the eight teams and rush to the bridge!” Sun Yingxiong shouted.

——-

“Divide the troops into two groups,” Yang Zhuo said, “Military Vice-General and Vice-General Lu, you lead your men to intercept them, while I will lead a breakthrough at the checkpoint!”

“Yes! Archers, release the arrows!” Ah Fei ordered. An arrow whistled through the air and struck one of the tents, causing it to burst into flames.

Since this was just an exercise, there was no need to actually burn down all the tents. Burning one tent symbolized the destruction of the enemy camp.

Yang Zhuo led half of the soldiers and charged towards the defenders' checkpoint.

Everything happened too quickly, and the timing was too precise. By the time the defending forces returned to the camp, Yang Zhuo had already led his troops to the checkpoint, shooting down most of the defenders and breaking through.

At the checkpoint, two groups of soldiers acted as wings, flanking the enemy forces, but they were scattered by the cavalry.

The exercise ended with the failure of the defenders.

Yang Zhuo and Sun Yingxiong consolidated their forces and returned to the defenders' camp, where they met Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen's expression was icy.

Sun Yingxiong and Zhang Yingjie knelt down and pleaded for forgiveness, "We have failed in battle. We beg Your Majesty for punishment!"

Huangfu Yuchen remained silent for a long time. In the darkness, the atmosphere was cold and oppressive, and even the lively croaking of frogs could not dispel the heavy and suffocating pressure.

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“We have invested so much financial resources in you and Yan Caiqing has devoted so much effort to make for you military books, yet this is how you repay Us, how you repay Yan Caiqing? You suffered a devastating defeat within less than twelve hours. How can We trust the capital under Our control in your hands? Hm?”

“We beg Your Majesty for punishment!” Sun Yingxiong and Zhang Yingjie said anxiously.

Yang Zhuo and the others also knelt down as well, afraid to speak.

Huangfu Yuchen asked, “Do you now understand where you went wrong?”

Sun Yingxiong said, “The mistake lies in—”

“No need to tell me,” Huangfu Yuchen interrupted, “Three months from now, I will give you another chance. If you still fail to satisfy me at that time, decide for yourselves what to do.”

Without waiting for Yang Zhuo and the others to respond, he pulled Yan Ge and left with a swing of his sleeve.

Only then did Zhang Yingjie and the others dare to breathe loudly.

Yang Zhuo stood up and looked at the bowed heads of Zhang Yingjie and Sun Yingxiong, speaking in a deep voice, “What’s this? Are you feeling dejected?”

“No!” Zhang Yingjie suddenly stood up, “General, the Ministry of War has prepared five days’ worth of supplies for us. Please give us another chance.”

“Good!” Yang Zhuo patted his shoulder vigorously, “That’s more like it! That’s the talent His Majesty needs! Return to your units and prepare for another battle.”

“But what about His Majesty’s decision…” Sun Yingxiong said.

Yang Zhuo said, “His Majesty probably won’t blame us. If he does, I’ll bear the responsibility.”

“Thank you, General!”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen walked far away, but Huangfu Yuchen still had a gloomy expression.

“Are you still angry, Yuchen?”

Huangfu Yuchen calmed his emotions a bit and his voice became warmer than before. “It seems that being too comfortable in the capital has made them slack off. I thought that even if they hadn’t trained according to the methods you provided, they should still be able to hold on for at least one day. It seems I had too much confidence in them.”

Yan Ge hooked his arm around Huangfu Yuchen’s shoulder. “Look at it from a positive perspective. We discovered the shortcomings of the Imperial Guards in a timely manner and can improve them. The Imperial Guards has always been the strongest force among all the armies in the kingdom. I believe this defeat will not sit well with them either.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded slightly. “Baby, perhaps you don’t know, but our strength in is only considered average among the dozens of surrounding Kingdoms. The recent peace in the Great Han over the past three to four years is all thanks to the efforts of the late emperor in suppressing the neighboring kingdoms. However, this suppression is only temporary, and there may be war again at any time. We must be prepared.”

“Don’t worry, I’m here!” Yan Ge boldly patted his chest, “With me by your side, who dares to bully Great Han?”

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled and leaned in closer to him.

Yan Ge said, “In today’s battle, I also have some thoughts. According to what Yang Zhuo said, Zhang Yingjie, the deputy general on the defending side, also serves as a military advisor. He first sent Qin San and the others to confuse their vision, and then used the bridge to create a false impression. It’s evident that he possesses strategic talent. With further cultivation, he will undoubtedly become a formidable military strategist. The reason for their subsequent defeat was the brilliant utilization of the weather, time, and surrounding resources. Even I couldn’t figure out why he wanted to buy fish at that time, so it’s no wonder Zhang Yingjie fell for it. That being said, we do have quite a few talents in our Imperial Guard. With the addition of the new military books, the military prospects of the Great Han Kingdom are still promising!”

“Hehe…” Huangfu Yuchen chuckled softly, “Being comforted like this by my love, I finally feel a bit relieved.”

Yan Ge grinned and playfully lifted his chin. “In that case, for the next military exercise, the First Company will sponsor it. Apart from not actually killing anyone, everything else will be done with real weapons!”

Huangfu Yuchen was surprised. “Baby, that’s not a small amount of money.”

Yan Ge smiled mischievously and said, “So what? Seeing you smile is worth it!”

Huangfu Yuchen insisted, “Let the treasury handle it. Since it’s a national matter, the funds should come from the treasury. Your money is your money, and my money is also your money.”

Yan Ge sighed sadly, “It’s not easy to have an opportunity to spare no expense, and you won’t allow it.”

“Okay, okay. The First Company will handle it.” Huangfu Yuchen reluctantly agreed, feeling both warm and amused. How could he not understand his baby’s intentions?

“That’s more like it,” Yan Ge said. “Since we’re on the subject, let me ask, how is the progress on the exchange of garrison troops on the border that you mentioned before?”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “The decree for the first batch of garrison troops to be exchanged on the border was issued half a month ago. Once the new recruits arrive, only half of the selected garrison troops will depart. Otherwise, it would leave the border defenseless and provide an opportunity for the enemy. The Northeast, Southwest, and Coastal garrison troops will be gradually exchanged next. The military books have also been secretly delivered to the hands of the border generals. After the new garrison troops have undergone training, their strength will undoubtedly increase significantly.”

“Can we rely on those border generals?” Yan Ge asked.

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “Rest assured, their families are in the capital. In addition, I have sent spies. As soon as they have memorized the contents of the military books, the books will be destroyed. Only we will have the originals.”

“That’s good. If the military books fall into the hands of another kingdom, the loss will be irreparable,” Yan Ge said.

Huangfu Yuchen hugged his waist. “It’s getting late. Let’s hurry up and go back.”

The two figures leaped a few times and disappeared into the night…

On their way to work, Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi noticed that Yan Ge seemed different today. Although his lips still unconsciously curved into a smile, there was a hint of contemplation in his eyes, as if he was pondering something serious.

“Master, we’ve arrived,” Xiao Chuanzi reminded Yan Ge to get off the carriage.

“Hmm,” Yan Ge snapped back to reality, “By the way, it’s been a long time since we checked on the situation at the amusement park. Send someone to invite Master Wen for a visit.”

“Understood.”

When Wen Xian entered Yan Ge’s office, he noticed that Yan Ge was not sitting behind the desk as usual. Instead, he stood by the wall, facing the large map of the Great Han hanging on it. With both hands behind his back, his silhouette carried an unusual depth.

“When did the suave Boss Yan start acting profound?” Wen Xian teased.

Yan Ge turned around, staring at him without saying a word.

Wen Xian raised an eyebrow. “It seems that Boss Yan called me here not for the amusement park but for something important.”

“Please have a seat,” Yan Ge motioned for him to sit anywhere.

Wen Xian took a seat, slightly curious, waiting for Yan Ge to speak.

With a faint smile, Yan Ge picked up his tea, took a sip, and calmly asked, “Master Wen, can I trust you?”

Wen Xian’s expression became slightly solemn, but he also smiled lightly. “I thought that after such a long period of cooperation, we have always appreciated each other, and trust each other as a result.”

Yan Ge nodded. “Indeed. I have a very important matter that I need your help with, or rather, the help of the Wen family. I wonder if you are willing.”

Wen Xian smiled again. “Rarely is there an opportunity for me to be of help to you. Please go ahead.”

Yan Ge went straight to the point. “I want you to open grain shops across major cities and towns in the kingdom. These shops will be branches of a larger network of grain shops.” This was the result of his consideration

throughout the night. To prevent people from associating the business with him, he needed to use a fresh face. However, most of his subordinates had appeared in front of others, making it difficult to find a trustworthy new face. Thus, it was best to find someone he trusted who could replace him without raising suspicion. Wen Xian became the best choice. Firstly, Wen Xian's character was indeed trustworthy. Secondly, the Wen family's business was large and involved various aspects. Suddenly opening a grain shop would not arouse suspicion.

Wen Xian's expression turned serious. The sensitive topic of food was inevitably related to warfare. Could it be…

Yan Ge anticipated his thoughts and quickly diverted attention from the main issue. "You also know how sensitive my identity is. If I were to get involved in this aspect, it would likely lead to various speculations and complicate matters."

The less Wen Xian knew about this national affair, the better. Without asking too many questions, Wen Xian agreed directly, "No problem."

Yan Ge nodded. "Thank you. If it truly proves useful in the future, I will make sure to give the Wen family great credit. I will provide the initial capital for the shops, and all profits will belong to you."

Wen Xian said, "No, I will provide the initial capital. Opening grain shops in several major cities across the country, as you requested, will require a considerable amount of funds. If I don't raise money for this venture, it may leave behind hidden dangers. In the future, you can find a way to repay the funds. I'm not worried that you won't have the money."

Yan Ge smiled. "That's good."

He really appreciated Wen Xian's straightforwardness and meticulous thinking. "Come over and take a look…"

As Wen Xian stood up, he glanced outside the door.

Yan Ge sensed his movements without looking back. “Don’t worry, there’s no third party around.”

Wen Xian walked to the map, and Yan Ge pointed to several locations on the map. “Here, here… and here. These towns need to have branches of grain shops. The inventory of the grain shops in the capital and the town of Youcheng must be the largest.” The locations he pointed to were all towns on the official roads leading to the coastal, southwest, northwest, and northeast regions. Youcheng, in particular, was the central town of Great Han and convenient for gathering food in any direction.

Wen Xian carefully looked and nodded. “I’ve noted them down.”

Yan Ge said, “Just to be cautious, you can start working on it in a month. It’s easy talking to smart people.” Yan Ge smiled, “I’m counting on you.”

One month later…

“Pa-pa-pa…” Under the scorching sun, firecrackers suddenly exploded, and red fragments flew in all directions like snowflakes, falling on the completely dry cement road. The ropes that separated pedestrians on both sides of the cement road were replaced with red ribbons, and they were filled with people, their faces brimming with joyful smiles.

Mischievous children squeezed and jostled around the adults, happily jumping and bouncing like it was New Year’s. The first construction project on Baorong Street in the capital was finally completed! Even traveling merchants who had traveled far and wide had never seen such a solid and smooth road. Even wandering martial artists who heard about it rushed to the capital to see the spectacle. They sat on the rooftops, inspecting the cement road back and forth with a look of curiosity in their eyes.

Not far away, the majestic Imperial Guards approached. The footsteps of all the soldiers and the bearers of the dragon sedan chair were wrapped in red cloth, moving in perfect synchronization, displaying an awe-inspiring military might. The first two people held up a plaque that read “Make Way.”

Yan Xiaojing, who was following the Imperial Guards, saw the martial artists on the rooftops from a distance and exchanged a glance with Luo Wei, the Minister of War, who was walking beside him.

The completion of the first cement road in the capital held great significance. Yan Xiaojing, as the Minister of Rites, had arranged the ceremony for the emperor to inspect the road, which symbolized the emperor's authority and would undoubtedly continue to grow stronger. Moreover, it served to further consolidate imperial power.

Luo Wei whispered, "Don't worry, the security is absolutely foolproof. Besides, I don't think they would do anything detrimental."

"Let's hope so," Yan Xiaojing replied.

The firecrackers continued unabated, and the festive gongs and drums resounded once again. Until the emperor's procession was only about a hundred meters away, the sound of the gongs and drums abruptly stopped.

The martial artists on the rooftops quickly jumped down.

The court official raised his voice, "Baorong Street is not only the first cement road in the capital but also the first cement road in the entire Qingchuan continent. May the emperor's grace be vast and revered for all eternity; may the talent of Yan Caiqing be celebrated for generations to come!"

Everyone was filled with excitement and awe, kneeling down on the ground, proclaiming, "Long live our emperor for ten thousand years—Yan Caiqing's extraordinary talent will be forever blessed, and may Great Han thrive!"

When they shouted blessings to Yan Ge, the words were varied, with some praying for his divine protection, eternal youth, and so on…

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Yan Ge found it amusing while sitting in the dragon sedan chair.

“You may rise.” said Huangfu Yuchen.

The court official shouted again, “May Your Majesty’s dragon aura pave the way—”

Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge walked hand in hand out of the dragon sedan chair.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “The smooth progress of road construction is not only the credit of Us and Yan Caiqing, but also the credit of the people. The repair of other roads will require the continued cooperation of the people with the court.”

“We obey,” the people responded.

The two of them walked along the cement road.

Yan Ge stepped on the long-awaited cement road with a smile on his face.

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at him with a smile, not interrupting his self-indulgence.

At this moment, several masked individuals suddenly flew out from the crowd, drawing their swords towards Huangfu Yuchen.

“Assassins!” the commoners shouted. They may not have much education, but they understood the most basic truth. If something were to happen to the emperor, who had been so considerate of the people, and the talented consort, who knew if the next emperor could be as benevolent?

Both Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge seemed oblivious, their expressions unchanged, continuing to walk forward.

The imperial guards swiftly intercepted the assassins, swiftly disarming one of them, revealing his face.

“Mai people?”

“Hmph!” Huang Shuya and Pei Jinde(the martial artist couple) saw this and flew out simultaneously. “With us here, the martial artists from foreign lands shouldn’t dare cause trouble in our Great Han!”

Several other martial artists also joined in, including one named Zhong Xie or Xiao Tianxie in the martial world.

“Why is it you again?”

Huang Shuya and Zhongxie exclaimed simultaneously upon seeing each other.

“Delivering goods.”

“Here for a visit.”

They skillfully made their moves and soon subdued all the assassins.

The involvement of the martial artists surprised Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Thank you, noble heroes, for lending a hand.”

Pei Jinde said, “Your Majesty doesn’t seem afraid that we might harm you.”

Huangfu Yuchen said calmly, “I consider myself neither foolish nor tyrannical, and I have never extorted the people. Why would this hero attack me?”

Zhongxie held his sword and looked disappointed. “I thought His Majesty would reward us with something.”

Yan Ge chuckled, “We heard that martial artists have strong principles, so we didn’t want to complicate matters.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Someone come.”

“Here, Your Majesty,” Yang Zhuo stepped forward. Huangfu Yuchen said, “Have someone take these heroes to Liuxian Pavilion. I’m sure you’ve all come from afar, so you can have a meal at Liuxian Pavilion. By the way, are the silver cards of Liuxian Pavilion appealing to you?”

The crowd was pleasantly surprised. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Pei Jinde said, “I have one more thing I would like to ask Your Majesty, if I may be so bold.”

“Go ahead.”

Pei Jinde said, “Will all the roads in the capital be completely repaired? Will the roads in other towns and cities of Great Han be repaired as well?”

Huangfu Yuchen proudly declared, “One day, it will happen.”

Pei Jinde and the others cast him a complex gaze, bowing before leaving with the escorting soldiers.

After walking along the street until they reached the city gate, the ceremony was considered complete. Huangfu Yuchen said, “Xiao Ge, I’m returning to the palace. Will you come with me?”

Yan Ge said, “I’ll come too. Is something the matter?”

Huangfu Yuchen looked pensive.

“What’s wrong?” Yan Ge asked.

Huangfu Yuchen communicated with him through voice transmission, “Today’s batch of assassins is already the sixth since we returned to the palace. Although the imperial guards and the hidden guards can handle

them, it’s apparent that they don’t regard Great Han highly. As long as they can’t achieve their goal, they will send more assassins.”

Yan Ge asked, “Who sent these assassins? Are any of them members of Centipede?”

“No, it seems that Centipede has disappeared from the martial world. Through interrogation, we only learned that these assassins were sent by other kingdoms. Apart from that, there is no further information.”

“This indicates that other kingdoms are becoming more and more wary of you and Great Han. We must strengthen the palace’s defense. Unfortunately, the Zhantian vine is still evolving, and its current sap can only sustain its own needs. Otherwise, we could use the sap of the Zhatiian vine to create a powerful army.”

“Well, I have an idea,” Huangfu Yuchen said, “Baby, do you remember the thing I gave to the leader of the Luna Worshipping Sect?”

“You mean spiritual energy?” Yan Ge immediately understood.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, “Exactly. I plan to select the top twenty elites from the Shadow guards and help them regulate their meridians with inner energy, and then use spiritual energy to enhance their abilities. They will become a more secretive and powerful force than the shadow guards.”

“Great idea!” Yan Ge asked, “Yuchen, do you remember that I still have five Foundation Building Pills?”

Huangfu Yuchen grabbed his hand firmly. “Absolutely not!”

Yan Ge was taken aback. “Why?”

Huangfu Yuchen said earnestly, “Xiao Ge, even if you want to give those five Foundation Building Pills to people you trust, I hope you wait until we become even stronger. Otherwise, if they were to betray us, how would we suppress them?”

Yan Ge hooked his neck with a smile. “Don’t worry, I don’t have such thoughts at the moment. Even if I were to give them to someone else, it would be useless without a cultivation technique. But the Foundation Building Pills have a strong effect on improving the physique. I was thinking, why not take one of the Foundation Building Pills, dissolve it, and refine it with some other rare medicinal ingredients to create a Vital Qi Pill? With the assistance of spiritual energy, its effects would be stronger than using spiritual energy alone.”

“You can refine this Vital Qi Pill?” Huangfu Yuchen was delighted.

Yan Ge said, “Of course. Leave it to me.”

“Thank you, my dear.”

The shadow guards were not only hidden in their work but also in their appearance, names, and backgrounds. Apart from the emperor and the leader of the shadow guards, no one else knew how many shadow guards there were or how powerful they truly were.

In the deep night, under the leadership of Cheng Jingfeng, the leader of the shadow guards, a carefully selected group of one hundred elite shadow guards silently made their way to the secluded empty hall within the palace where no one lived.

“Boss,” one of the shadow guards couldn’t help but ask, “Where are we going with so many people?”

Everyone was dressed in identical attire, except for Cheng Jingfeng, whose mask had a touch of gold, and the vice Leader Zhan Xiao, whose mask had a touch of silver.

Cheng Jingfeng tersely said, “Don’t ask.”

Shortly after, everyone landed in the empty backyard of the palace.

In the garden, a figure clad in golden robes stood with hands behind his back, tall and imposing, his face stern, exuding an aura of dominance.

The emperor!

The silent shadow guards knelt down on one knee.

“Rise,” Huangfu Yuchen picked up a wooden box from a nearby stone railing and opened it, “You are all the elite of the shadow guards. I have a highly dangerous mission that requires twenty individuals to complete. This mission will be lengthy, and you may lose your lives at any moment. Here are twenty pills. If you are willing to accept the mission, take one for yourself; if you are unwilling, rest assured, I will not consider you any less loyal, and you may return to your positions in the shadow guards. Think it through before making a decision.” He deliberately did not specify whether the pills were poisonous or medicinal.

Cheng Jingfeng approached silently, taking a porcelain bottle. Zhan Xiao did the same. Du Zhengfeng was among them, stepping forward without hesitation. Some were decisive, while others hesitated. After a while, all twenty pill bottles were taken.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Those who haven’t taken one may return to their respective positions.”

Only Huangfu Yuchen and the twenty hidden guards remained in place.

Huangfu Yuchen casually said, “First, put away the pill bottles, then attack me together and give it your all.”

“For the emperor’s dragon body is the most important thing,” Cheng Jingfeng’s tone carried disapproval, “These are all skilled individuals from the shadow guards…”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Do as I say.”

Cheng Jingfeng could only nod to the others, and they surrounded Huangfu Yuchen, launching a coordinated assault.

Huangfu Yuchen leaped into the air, his golden imperial robe fluttering rapidly, his palms carrying an icy wind. He swiftly maneuvered between the

twenty shadow guards, striking with lightning speed. In less than an incense stick, he had subdued all twenty shadow guards with precise acupoint strikes.

The shadow guards were astonished. They had often sparred with the emperor before, engaging in one-on-one combat and the emperor was never their match. Yet today, a group of twenty could not withstand the emperor's fifty moves! What astonishing strength!

They looked at Huangfu Yuchen with eyes filled with awe and respect, even more submissive than before.

"The Emperor's martial prowess is unparalleled. We are unworthy," they exclaimed.

Huangfu Yuchen released their acupoints. "Take the pills."

Without objection, they opened the bottles and ingested the pills.

"Sit cross-legged."

They complied once again.

Huangfu Yuchen used the cultivation technique from the Fengyun Immortal Manual to gather the spiritual energy of heaven and earth, splitting it into twenty strands and infusing it into the bodies of the twenty shadow guards…

After an incense stick, Huangfu Yuchen ceased the technique.

Zhan Xiao exclaimed in pleasant surprise, "Emperor, not only have our strengths greatly increased, but it seems our meridians have also been widened, and the circulation of our inner energy is three to four times faster than before!"

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, "The leader of the shadow guards shall depart, and the vice-leader will become the new leader and remain in the palace, leading all the shadow guards. As for the position of vice-leader, it is for the new leader to decide and report to me."

Zhan Xiao was surprised but had no objections. “I will follow your orders, Your Majesty. I will continue to devote myself wholeheartedly to you, even to the point of death.”

After Zhan Xiao left, Huangfu Yuchen declared, “From now on, you shall be known as the Elite Guards!”

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“Master, see you tomorrow.”

Chunxiang and Tong Yiyi saw Yan Ge off from work together.

*Chunxiang was among the people Yan Ge bought along with Deng Mama, Taohua, Zhao Cheng, Zhang Yuan etc.

“See you tomorrow,” Yan Ge led Yan Jin away.

Tong Yiyi stared intently at Yan Ge and Yan Jin’s fading figures.

Chunxiang ruffled her hair affectionately. “Yiyi, do you really want to play with Little Jin that much? Don’t worry, he’ll come over tomorrow.”

“Little Jin is cute, but I like Boss Yan.” Tong Yiyi looked up at her, a shy smile on her face. “Sister Chunxiang, do you think Boss Yan will like me as much as he likes Little Jin?”

“He will,” Chunxiang bent down and hugged her. “Look, it’s about to rain. Let’s go, I’ll carry you back to your room.”

Chunxiang attempted to lift her, but couldn’t. She couldn’t help but laugh. “Oh, I didn’t expect you to be so small, yet so heavy.”

Tong Yiyi pushed away her arms and pursed her lips, smiling. “Sister Chunxiang, I’m not a child anymore. I can walk on my own.”

“Alright, let’s go.”

“Boom—” thunder rumbled, and the rain began to pour.

They hurriedly ran towards the house.

“Yiyi, quickly go to your room and change into dry clothes. Don’t catch a cold.”

“Okay.”

After Tong Yiyi left, Chunxiang wiped the rain off her face. Fortunately, they ran fast, so she was only slightly wet. Deng Mama and Tao Hua were tidying up in the hall, and she walked over to help.

“Did the master leave?” Deng Mama asked.

“Yes, he’s already gone,” Chunxiang smiled. “I thought Yiyi would be reluctant to part with Little Jin, but it turns out she’s reluctant to part with the master.”

“They’re just kids, they all admire heroes,” Tao Hua teased.

Chunxiang poured the leftover tea from the teapot. “But you wouldn’t expect her to be so small yet so heavy. Earlier, when I saw that it was going to rain, I was going to carry her, but I couldn’t lift her.”

Deng Mama, who rarely spoke, suddenly spoke up. “What did you say?”

Chunxiang paused. “Deng Mama, I was saying that it was going to rain and I couldn’t lift Yiyi.”

Deng Mama muttered in a low voice, “Small yet heavy…”

“Yes,” Chunxiang and Tao Hua hua exchanged glances.

They looked at Deng Mama with concern. “Deng Mama? What’s wrong with you?”

“It’s nothing,” Deng Mama put down the cloth. “I’ll leave this to you. I’m feeling tired, so I’ll go rest in my room.”

“Alright.”

After dinner, everyone retired to their rooms. Zhang Yuan accompanied Tong Yiyi to the door of the woodshed. “Yiyi, are you scared of thunder at night? Should I take you to Chunxiang’s room?”

“No need,” Tong Yiyi shook her head obediently. “Brother Zhang Yuan, you underestimate me. After being kidnapped and experiencing all sorts of hardships, I’ve seen it all.”

Zhang Yuan looked at her insistence and left the lantern before departing, shaking his head. It was hard to know what to say to her. Originally, Deng Mama arranged for her to stay with Chunxiang, but she insisted that she was just freeloading here and didn’t want to take up Chunxiang’s room. That she would feel even more uncomfortable. Such a pitiful little girl.

When the entire company headquarters fell silent, the quiet woodshed suddenly echoed with a few “crack-crack” sounds, as if bones were being dislocated.

Flashes of lightning intermittently illuminated the small figure lying on the straw mat in the woodshed. She was covered with an adult’s clothes, rubbing her face with her hands and shaking her neck, emitting cracking sounds. Her features gradually transformed! She stretched out her limbs, and the bone-dislocating sound continued as her limbs elongated. In no time, the child’s figure completely changed, though she was still shorter than an average adult woman, her face clearly that of a thirty-something adult!

Outside the window, Deng Mama stood silently, taking in the scene with her eyes. Her pupils contracted sharply, her expression grave!

But she didn’t disturb the person inside; instead, she quietly turned and vanished amidst the roar of thunder and lightning.

Early in the morning, when Yan Ge arrived at the company, he heard Deng Mama’s report, and his eyes widened. Not out of fear for the hidden danger lurking around him, but out of curiosity. So, it turned out there really was someone in this world who could use bone-shrinking skills? Wasn’t that just a legend?

“Is she really that powerful?” Yan Ge asked.

Deng Mama replied, “Yes. I happened to have seen her once many years ago, so I hadn’t remembered until now.”

Tong Yiyi’s real name is Feng Yiyi. She was born with a height of only four feet, already petite, and her advantage in practicing bone-shrinking skills was greater than others. Because she liked to transform into a child, she had a natural talent for acting. The martial world gave her a nickname, ‘The Ever-changing Doll.’ Don’t underestimate her innocent appearance; she was ruthless and cunning. There was nothing she wouldn’t do to achieve her goals. Even someone with great martial arts skills could accidentally fall prey to her tricks.

Yan Ge nodded. “Based on what you’ve said, it’s possible that her target is me. She knows I have a child with me, which is why she disguised herself as a child. I have no grudges with her, so obviously, she’s working for someone else, but I don’t know who. However, since she appears as a child, I can’t just act against her rashly. If it were to be known by others that I bullied a child, I need to find a way to force her to reveal her true identity first.”

Deng Mama said, “Master, I have a solution.”

Yan Ge said, “Please go ahead and speak.”

Deng Mama said, “Although Feng Yiyi has exceptional martial arts skills, she has a weakness.”

Yan Ge exclaimed, “Deng Mama, you mentioned that you only met her once, so how do you know so much about her?”

Deng Mama remained silent.

Yan Ge didn’t pursue the matter upon seeing her reaction. Deng Mama had been with the company for so long that her loyalty was unquestionable.

“Don’t worry, it was just a casual question—”

But Deng Mama suddenly knelt down, trying her best to maintain a steady pace of speech, yet Yan Ge could still sense her inner unrest. “Master, these are things that this servant heard from her husband.”

Yan Ge was startled and reached out to support her. “Deng Mama, what are you doing? Just speak. But this is the first time I’ve heard you mention your husband.”

Deng Mama stood on the side. “Actually, the reason why this servant came to the capital was to find her husband.”

“Find your husband? Are you saying your husband is in the capital?” Yan Ge was puzzled. “Why do you say ‘find’ him? Was he a talented scholar who, after achieving the top rank, immediately abandoned his ordinary wife and remarried a nobleman’s daughter for power and wealth?”

Deng Mama looked at him, her expression somewhat helpless. “It’s not like that. As far as I know, he hasn’t remarried.”

“You’ve already found him?” Yan Ge was perplexed. “If so, why haven’t you been together with him?”

Deng Mama’s expression was complicated and unclear. “I deliberately appeared in front of him before, but he didn’t seem to recognize me…”

“Really? Has he lost his memory?” Yan Ge felt like he was listening to a fantasy tale.

Deng Mama shook her head and sighed softly. “This servant doesn’t know…”

Yan Ge said, “In any case, since he hasn’t remarried, it’s a good thing. Deng Mama, you should make a move when the time is right. Otherwise, when he truly remarries someone else, you’ll regret it. After all this talking, who is he exactly? Do I know him?” He picked up the teacup and took a sip.

Deng Mama said, “Yang Zhuo.”

“Pftt—” Yan Ge sprayed the tea he was drinking out of his mouth, his eyes widening in surprise. “Am I hearing correctly? Yang Zhuo? The Commander of the Imperial Guards, Yang Zhuo? Are you saying he used to be a member of the martial world?”

“I’m not clear about why he entered the palace to work and even became the Commander of the Imperial Guards,” Deng Mama knelt on one knee. “I didn’t mention it before because this servant was worried that if you and the Emperor knew he came from the martial world, you would suspect him of having ulterior motives for entering the palace. But now, this servant can be sure that General Yang has no ulterior motives towards the Emperor or you.”

“That’s true.” Yan Ge nodded. “I’ve heard from Yuchen that Yang Zhuo was promoted by him after ascending the throne. If Yuchen didn’t trust him, he wouldn’t have promoted him. In that case, I’ll ask Yuchen about it.”

“Thank you, Master,” Deng Mama said. “Master, it’s still important to deal with the problem of Feng Yiyi. Her weakness is…”

As he reached the entrance of Tenglong Palace after returning from work, Yan Ge happened to see Yang Zhuo leading a team of Imperial Guards on patrol, walking towards them. He took a few more glances from a distance.

“Xiao Ge, what are you looking at?” Huangfu Yuchen followed his gaze, puzzled.

“Yuchen, let’s go inside first. I have something to ask you.”

Both of them sat down on the couch, and Yan Ge asked, “Today, Deng Mama told me something…”

Huangfu Yuchen listened and was also greatly surprised. “Such a thing actually happened? It might be true.”

“So, Yang Zhuo really lost his memory?” Yan Ge said. “Otherwise, he wouldn’t have failed to recognize Deng Mama.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. “That was ten years ago. Back then, when I was still the Crown Prince, I once inspected the military training in the western capital on behalf of the late emperor. On the way back, I saw a young man covered in blood lying by the roadside, with only a faint breath remaining. It was evident that this person was from the martial world. At the time, I didn’t have many people with me and initially didn’t want to get involved. If his enemies were to chase after him, we might not be able to handle it. However, I suddenly noticed that his hands were covered in bloodstains, indicating that he had crawled a considerable distance to reach the roadside. Seeing his strong will to survive, I felt a sense of awe and brought him onto the carriage, using the best medicine from the palace to save him. This person was Yang Zhuo. But after he regained consciousness, he only remembered his name as Yang Zhuo and had a vague recollection of engaging in a fierce battle with a group of people. Other than that, he didn’t remember anything. When he learned that I saved him, he insisted on following me to repay his debt of gratitude. After observing him for some time and confirming that his memory loss was not feigned, I kept him by my side and arranged for him to join the Imperial Guards. Over the years, he has been unwaveringly loyal to me, so as soon as I ascended the throne, I promoted him to the Commander of the Imperial Guards.”

Yan Ge couldn’t help but ask, “He’s already in his thirties and still unmarried. Don’t you find it strange?”

“Baby, I’m not as… inquisitive as you,” Huangfu Yuchen lightly brushed his lips and smiled. “However, curiosity does exist. I once planned to arrange a marriage for him, but he rejected it. When I asked for the reason, he couldn’t explain clearly and only vaguely felt that it shouldn’t be done.”

The flame of curiosity burned brighter in Yan Ge's eyes. "Could it be that subconsciously he remembers being married before?"

"I don't know. Shall we call him over and ask?" Huangfu Yuchen suggested.

Yan Ge shook his head. "We shouldn't act hastily in this matter. The situation between him and Deng Mama is too special. If we mishandle it, both of them might feel awkward. I'll handle this."

Huangfu Yuchen felt that Yang Zhuo was definitely going to be unlucky, but he had no intention of warning him and instead looked forward to the outcome.

The next day, while Yan Ge was busy in his office, Jiang Gan sent Yan Jin over.

"Papa, take me to the amusement park," Yan Jin tugged on Yan Ge's hand and swayed back and forth.

"If you want someone to take you, ask your father or let your imperial father take you. I'm very busy," Yan Ge stared at the account book, swiftly writing words. He used his left hand to pat Yan Jin's head.

"But I want you to take me. Among the three fathers, I like you the most," Yan Jin stood in front of the desk, his two chubby hands on the edge of the table, his two grape-like eyes looking at him, glistening with tears that were about to fall.

Yan Ge helplessly put down the pen. "Alright."

As they stepped out of the threshold, they saw Tong Yiyi timidly hiding behind a pillar and appearing hesitant.

"Yiyi, come with us!" Yan Jin ran over, holding her hand and smiling.

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Tong Yiyi hesitated, “I’d better not go. I’m a girl…”

“Sister, go,” Yan Jin held her hand firmly. “Girls can dress up as boys, right, Papa?”

Yan Ge walked over and said gently, “Since Little Jin likes you so much, why don’t you come with us?”

“Can I really?” Tong Yiyi raised her head in surprise, her eyes innocent and pure.

Yan Ge sighed inwardly. If it weren’t for Deng Mama, he wouldn’t have believed that someone with such innocent eyes could have hidden malicious intentions.

Then let’s see who has better acting skills!

“Of course, it’s true,” Yan Ge sighed. “Speaking of which, although it was a minimal effort to save you back then, I didn’t care much about you afterwards. It wasn’t easy for you to be separated from your parents at such a young age. Any, I’ll have someone find a set of male clothing for you, so you can dress up as a boy.”

“Thank you, Master.” Tong Yiyi concealed her joy and sweetly smiled at Yan Ge.

After Tong Yiyi got ready, they prepared to board the carriage. Yan Ge held the reins and said, “You two can ride in the carriage.”

Tong Yiyi: “Master, the sun is so strong, and riding a horse would be too hot. Why don’t you ride in the carriage?”

Yan Ge shook his head. “That would be against etiquette. Remember, after the age of seven, boys and girls shouldn’t share the same seat. Little Jin is still young, so it’s fine for now.”

Tong Yiyi looked at him gratefully. “Thank you, Master, for reminding Yiyi.”

Yan Ge mounted his horse, and Yan Jin stretched out his little arms. “Papa, I want to ride a horse too. I’m not a child; I’m a man!”

“A man? You?” Yan Ge laughed. “Riding a horse exposes you to the sun. You’ll ride in the carriage.”

“No,” Yan Jin insisted. “I’m a little man, and I want to ride a horse.”

“Alright, alright,” Yan Ge reluctantly agreed and lifted him onto the horse by his nape.

Chunxiang and the others were no longer surprised. The little master was resilient, so it didn’t matter if he was lifted a few more times.

The carriage carried only Tong Yiyi.

When they arrived at the amusement park, Yan Ge bought two full tickets. Yan Ge and Tong Yiyi played all the attractions one by one, their laughter never ceased.

At the water park, Tong Yiyi said, “Little Jin, sister gets seasick, so I won’t accompany you.”

Yan Jin tightly held her hand and refused to let go. “Sister, nothing will happen. The water in the water park doesn’t flow, so there won’t be any seasickness. Sister, accompany me on the boat.”

“This…” Tong Yiyi still shook her head. “I’m sorry, Little Jin. Sister really gets seasick.”

“Sister, just accompany me for a while. It won’t be fun for me to play alone. How about you close your eyes, and I’ll hold your hand?” Yan Jin looked

pitifully at her.

Tong Yiyi had no choice but to nod. “Okay then.”

Yan Jin and Tong Yiyi boarded the small boat. The boat was very stable and was being pulled by ropes, swinging back and forth on the water.

Tong Yiyi held onto the side of the boat, feeling very nervous. Yan Jin splashed water with both hands, thoroughly enjoying himself.

The boat slowly reached the center of the water. At that moment, a powerful force suddenly surged from under the boat, flipping it over and capsizing it. Yan Jin run on the water and landed on the shore.

Tong Yiyi exclaimed in shock and fell into the water. The water surface became turbulent, and through the clear water, one could see her desperately struggling.

The onlookers exclaimed. The young master was so skilled, but why wasn’t anyone saving the other child who fell into the water? They looked at Yan Ge, who still had a faint smile on his lips, wondering what was going on.

Suddenly, a splashing sound came from the water, and a woman who was noticeably taller than the child who fell earlier emerged. Her clothes were stretched out, and a large portion of her arms and legs were exposed. The spectators were stunned. Wasn’t this the child who fell into the water just now? How did she suddenly grow bigger? Moreover, the disheveled appearance clearly indicated that she was a woman.

Feng Yiyi’s expression turned fierce as she took out around ten silver needles from who-knows-where. With a swift motion of both her wrists, the silver needles shot towards Yan Caiqing.

“Assassin!” The crowd exclaimed, shouting in alarm.

Yan Ge laughed silently, evading the silver needles. With a flick of his right hand, he waved his palm, and a powerful stream of air instantly pressed Feng Yiyi down towards the water.

Feng Yiyi's face turned pale, and she screamed as she fell into the water, desperately struggling in fear. "Help, help!"

Yan Ge signaled to Deng Mama among the crowd, and Deng Mama flew up, pressing acupuncture points on Feng Yiyi, lifting her out of the water and taking her away.

Yan Ge clasped his hands to the crowd. "There's no need to panic, everyone. That woman is an assassin from the martial world. She used the shrinking bone technique to disguise herself as a child and infiltrate the First Company. Just now, I deliberately had the boat overturned to expose her true identity. Our amusement park is absolutely safe, so rest assured."

Afterward, he hurriedly returned to the First Company with Yan Jin.

Feng Yiyi was being interrogated.

Well aware that she couldn't afford to lie, Feng Yiyi revealed that she was sent by the Centipede Organization. It seemed that the Centipede Organization realized they couldn't capture Yan Ge through force alone, so they changed their strategy and paid a hefty sum to have Feng Yiyi pose as a child, gaining his trust before making a move on him.

Feng Yiyi had little knowledge about the Centipede Organization and didn't possess any valuable information.

"I've told you everything I know. Can you release me now?" Feng Yiyi said.

Deng Mama said, "Why would you think that confessing would lead to your release? Don't you know that assassinating members of the royal family is a capital offense?"

Feng Yiyi's face changed. "I didn't want to kill him! I just wanted to capture him!"

"It's the same," Deng Mama said indifferently.

“No, no,” Feng Yiyi’s face turned pale. “Even the people in the martial world know that Yan Caiqing is renowned for his compassion towards the people. I’m also a citizen of Great Han. He won’t kill me!”

Yan Ge walked in. “Whether I kill you or not is not up to me but the law. Deng Mama, take her to the dungeon.”

“Understood.”

Upon returning to the palace, Yan Ge informed Huangfu Yuchen about Tong Yiyi’s true identity and the interrogation results.

Huangfu Yuchen angrily slammed the table. “The Centipede Organization is so persistent. From the first time they targeted us until now, they have taken numerous actions. I refuse to believe that as the ruler of this country, I cannot uncover any clues about this organization’s activities within our borders! Guards!”

“Your Majesty.”

Two shadow guards appeared.

“Reinvestigate the whereabouts of the Centipede Organization without missing any trace!”

“Yes!”

“Reinvestigate the Centipede Organization, starting from when they first emerged six years ago!”

“Yes!”

“Bring me a report on all individuals in the capital who have close relations with me and Yan Caiqing!”

“Yes!”

After issuing the orders, Yan Ge approached Huangfu Yuchen, placing his hand on his back. “Alright, getting angry at others is just self-torture. We

are in the light, while they are in the dark. It’s no surprise that we cannot overcome them for a moment. I suggested luring them out, but you didn’t agree…”

Huangfu Yuchen slapped his buttocks and said sternly, “No more mischief!”

Yan Ge sighed helplessly, “Fine.”

Huangfu Yuchen still worried, “Xiao Ge, listen to me. You witnessed Meng Xiaohun’s abilities during our last confrontation. His abilities are also quite extraordinary. It has been some time since then, and perhaps his abilities have grown stronger. Before we have complete confidence, you must not act rashly. Promise me.”

Yan Ge honestly replied, “Actually, I really wanted to…”

“No!” Huangfu Yuchen interrupted him before he could finish speaking.

“Then forget it,” Yan Ge shrugged and pulled him up. “Get up.”

“What for?” Huangfu Yuchen stood up, puzzled.

Yan Ge slapped his buttocks with a “smack” and swiftly slipped away.

Huangfu Yuchen stood there speechless for a while, sighed, shook his head, and sat down. This guy really didn’t hold back.

Deng Mande also wanted to sigh. Can’t the Emperor and Yan Caiqing stop flirting like this every day? It made him lower his head every day, and he genuinely worried that one day his neck would break.

“Eunuch Deng, go remind Xiao Ge about tomorrow’s matter.”

Deng Mande smiled and said, “Your Majesty, tomorrow you are going on a… “date” with Yan Caiqing, right?”

Huangfu Yuchen coughed lightly. “Just going out for a walk.”

“Yes, yes, just a casual walk,” Deng Mande suppressed his laughter. “This servant will go and catch up with Yan Caiqing.”

Last time, Huangfu Yuchen came up with the idea of a shaving knife for Yan Ge (although Yan Ge thought it was his own idea, but Huangfu Yuchen insisted it was his). The two of them had agreed to spend a romantic day together in the mountains, but unfortunately, the weather was not favorable. It started raining just as they were about to set off after breakfast that day.

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“It seems we can’t go to the mountains today,” Yan Ge looked at the rain pouring outside the window.

“Who said that?” Huangfu Yuchen produced two umbrellas out of nowhere, clearly prepared in advance.

Yan Ge chuckled.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “The mountain road is difficult to traverse, so let’s take a stroll in the Imperial Garden.”

Yan Ge nodded, took an umbrella and opened it.

“Yours is broken,” Huangfu Yuchen handed him his own umbrella. “Let’s get another one.”

Yan Ge examined the umbrella from top to bottom. “Isn’t this made of cloth?”

“It’s oiled paper. No fabric can be as waterproof as oiled paper,” Huangfu Yuchen replied.

Yan Ge tore off a piece from the torn umbrella and examined it. “Indeed, it’s oiled paper. So there’s no fabric that can be as waterproof as oiled paper? What if it rains during a military campaign?”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Wear a raincoat or just get wet.”

Yan Ge raised an eyebrow, his lips curled up and his eyes became bright.

Huangfu Yuchen put down the umbrella and helped him sit on a chair, while he himself sat on the side, calmly observing him. Yan Ge must have thought of something again so their planned walk in the rain had to be canceled.

After calculating in his mind, Yan Ge snapped back to reality and asked, “Oh, why am I sitting down?”

“What do you think?” Huangfu Yuchen stuffed a grape into his mouth.

Yan Ge said, “I was just thinking about improving the umbrella. There’s money to be made. How come I didn’t think of such a simple thing earlier? Du Juan, you go… Oh, not necessary for now. Yuchen, let’s go for a walk.”

“I’m amazed you still remember me.” Huangfu Yuchen fed him another grape, wiped the grape juice off his hand, and the two of them took their umbrellas and went out together.

The rain today was just right, refreshing the air and bringing a cool breeze. Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were in a good mood as they walked in the Imperial Garden. They had someone bring a chessboard and played Gomoku. Only in playing Gomoku did Yan Ge have a chance of winning against Huangfu Yuchen.

“Baby, am I missing a chess piece here?” Huangfu Yuchen looked at the chessboard and asked.

Yan Ge was puzzled. “How would I know? Maybe you thought it is a bean and ate it.”

Huangfu Yuchen looked at the black chess pieces, then at the snack plate of dried and spiced soybeans which Yan Ge said “the crunchy sound of chewing is interesting”. He confirmed that he was not color blind.

“I win,” Yan Ge said confidently, taking a silver coin worth ten taels from Huangfu Yuchen’s money box and putting it in his own.

Huangfu Yuchen: “…”

“Another round?” Yan Ge glanced at his money box. “We both had ten taels of silver, but now you only have one tael left.”

Deng Mande thought to himself, ‘Yan Caiqing, five of the nine taels you won were obtained through cheating.’

“Let’s play again,” Huangfu Yuchen said, “but wait a moment.”

Huangfu Yuchen took out a handkerchief from his pocket and tied it around Yan Ge’s left sleeve, then pulled out a handkerchief from Yan Ge’s pocket and tied it around the right sleeve.

Yan Ge smiled and said, “Thanks, it’s much more convenient this way.”

Huangfu Yuchen sighed and rubbed his forehead. “Let’s begin.”

After a while, Huangfu Yuchen said, “I win.”

After a while longer, Huangfu Yuchen said again, “I win.”

Finally, Huangfu Yuchen opened his mouth, but Yan Ge interrupted him. “I know, you win.”

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled, touched the back of Yan Ge’s neck, and said, “It’s almost noon. I’ll have the food brought here.”

“Let’s have hotpot. It’s been a while since we had hotpot,” Yan Ge’s mouth watered.

“Alright, as you wish.”

Tian Guiren stood behind the flower bushes, soaked from head to toe, watching the two of them chatting and laughing in the pavilion, her eyes filled with jealousy and hatred. Things would have been wonderful if it weren’t for Yan Caiqing!

Huangfu Yuchen’s sharp gaze suddenly swept over, his cold eyes seemingly looking at a dead person.

Tian Guiren's heart trembled. She turned her head back, her knees weak, and she fell to the ground, trembling all over.

Huangfu Yuchen sent a voice transmission to Deng Mande, "Keep an eye on Tian Guiren. If she makes any moves at Xiao Ge, execute her without mercy!"

"I want fish fillets, various meatballs, fatty beef, mushrooms, and potato slices. What do you want?" Yan Ge didn't notice Tian Guiren's presence.

Huangfu Yuchen smiled and said, "Anything is fine. You decide for me."

Yan Ge said to Deng Mande, "Let the Imperial Kitchen prepare about a dozen dishes. That should be enough to satisfy our appetites."

"Yes, I understand. Rice should not be missing," Deng Mande replied.

"Yes," Yan Ge nodded in approval.

Yan Ge said to Huangfu Yuchen, "After we finish eating, I'll need your help."

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. "To make an umbrella?"

"Yes, let's make a prototype and test its effectiveness."

After enjoying the spicy hotpot, the two of them returned to the Tenglong Palace, changed into ordinary clothes, and arrived at Yan Ge's laboratory.

This laboratory was the birthday gift Huangfu Yuchen gave Yan Ge this year. It was about 200 square meters in size, with the most eye-catching feature being the brown medicine cabinet on the left wall, occupying an entire side of the wall. The medicine cabinet was divided into hundreds of small compartments, containing various medicinal ingredients used in the Imperial Hospital.

On the right side was the laboratory bench and storage shelves. The shelves displayed commonly used tools. If Yan Ge invented something, he could create a prototype in this laboratory. It was spacious and discreet. No idle

people were allowed to enter here, not even for cleaning. Only trusted individuals arranged by Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were permitted. Otherwise, if anyone tampered with the medicinal ingredients, it would pose a hidden danger.

“Bring another umbrella. Also, get some more candles,” Yan Ge ordered, handing his umbrella to Huangfu Yuchen. “First, remove the oilcloth on top.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, formed a fire seal, and with a “whoosh,” the umbrella burned until it only the frame was left.

Yan Ge was taken aback, and he stroked his chin. Could this guy’s intelligence really surpass his own? If someone else was asked to dismantle an umbrella, their first instinct would surely be to tear off the oilcloth. No, this could only mean that this guy was lazier than him.

“What’s wrong?” Huangfu Yuchen looked at Yan Ge, puzzled by his somewhat gloomy expression. Not knowing what he was thinking, he shook his head and a mischievous smile crept up on his face.

“It’s nothing.” Yan Ge picked up the frame and examined it. “Each rib of the umbrella is straight, so when the umbrella is opened, the fabric doesn’t have enough tension. No wonder some umbrellas have poor waterproofing. Go and fetch some bamboo sticks.”

Despite the continuing rain, the bamboo sticks were wiped dry before being brought inside.

Yan Ge picked up one and handed it to Huangfu Yuchen. “Cut it into thin strips, like chopsticks. The length should be similar to the ribs of this umbrella. Deng Mande, have someone prepare three pieces of fabric, each large enough to make an umbrella this size. Also, have someone steam resin, pine resin will do. When steaming, be careful to use two pots—one large and one small. Fill the large pot with water and heat it over high flame; place the resin in the small pot, which should be floating on the water in the large pot. Understand? And melt some candles as well…”

“I understand,” Deng Mande replied, “This slave will also ensure confidentiality.”

“Good. A capable student.” Yan Ge smiled at Huangfu Yuchen. “Yuchen, you should give Deng Mande a raise.”

Deng Mande was praised by Yan Ge and happily said, “After following Your Majesty and Yan Caiqing for so long, this slave only learned a little. Yan Caiqing, you’re overpraising me. This slave will get it done now.”

Huangfu Yuchen skillfully cut bamboo strips while asking, “Why do we need two pots of different sizes?” If an outsider saw this scene, their jaw would surely drop. The esteemed emperor had actually rolled up his sleeves and assisted someone.

Yan Ge replied, “The pine resin melted by this method is more pure.”

However, under the current conditions, the speed of melting the resin using this method was slow. After steaming for one and a half hours, Deng Mande personally brought over the melted resin and wax solution.

Following the existing umbrella as a reference, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen made three new umbrella frames using bamboo strips. They tightly tied two pieces of fabric to the frame, while the third piece was soaked in the wax solution before being installed.

For the remaining two umbrellas, Yan Ge instructed Huangfu Yuchen to evenly apply a thin layer of resin solution to one umbrella’s fabric, leaving the other one untreated.

“Baby, won’t the umbrella without any coating let water seep through when it gets rained on?” Huangfu Yuchen raised a question.

Yan Ge secretly felt proud. Those who hadn’t studied physics wouldn’t understand, would they?

“You’ll see in a moment.”

After applying the resin solution, Yan Ge had a eunuch hold the resin-coated umbrella in the corridor, allowing the cool breeze to quickly dry the umbrella's surface.

After a while, Yan Ge touched the umbrella surface, which was no longer sticky. The resin had dried out.

He ordered three eunuchs, "Each of you take an umbrella and stand in the rain. Oh, and wear some extra clothes, so you don't catch a cold."

"Thank you for your concern, Yan Caiqing. We are all in good health," the eunuchs replied.

The three eunuchs held their umbrellas and stood in the rain.

After a while, Yan Ge asked the eunuch holding the regular fabric umbrella, "How is it? Is the umbrella leaking?"

The eunuch replied in astonishment, "Reporting to Yan Caiqing, although the umbrella is wet, it doesn't leak."

"Baby, why is that?" Huangfu Yuchen also expressed his surprise. "Is it related to the curved ribs of the umbrella."

"Correct," Yan Ge gestured for the eunuch to come back and pointed at the umbrella's surface as he explained to Huangfu Yuchen, "When the umbrella is opened, the fabric becomes tightly stretched, and the gaps between the lines that make up the fabric are also pulled taut, squeezing together. This makes it difficult for raindrops to penetrate. Moreover, the umbrella surface is inclined. Just imagine, when a bead falls on a sloping surface, it naturally rolls down along the slope. That's why the umbrella fabric doesn't leak."

"I see now," Huangfu Yuchen nodded.

Deng Mande and the others also found it fascinating.

"Now let's take a look at the resin-coated umbrella and the wax-coated umbrella," Yan Ge said.

The eunuch holding the resin-coated umbrella excitedly said, “Yan Caiqing, the inside of both umbrellas is completely dry. There’s not a drop of water.”

Yan Ge smirked at Huangfu Yuchen. “How about that?”

“You’re amazing as ever, my love.”

Yan Ge chuckled. “It’s a pity, though. Both the wax-coated umbrella and the resin-coated umbrella have their flaws. Wax is a luxury item, and making a wax-coated umbrella would be too costly. As for the resin-coated umbrella, the cost is relatively low, but the resin will become hard and brittle when it dries. After multiple uses, the coating might easily peel off. I’ll have to think of a way to improve them for mass production.”

At that moment, a eunuch rushed in through the rain, drenched from head to toe. However, a joyful smile adorned his face.

“Yan Caiqing, this slave has good news!”

Yan Ge was puzzled.

The eunuch approached and knelt down before Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. “This slave greets His Majesty and Yan Caiqing . Congratulations to Yan Caiqing! It has been announced that Lady Yan Wen is pregnant!” (Yan Wen is the Miss Wen that Yan Su married.)

The news that Yan Wen had conceived brought great joy to the entire Yan family, including Yan Ge. He specifically asked Physician Zhang to examine her pulse, check for any issues with her health, and advise on how to take care of herself. He also wrote a letter asking Yan Su to serve in the army without any worries about home. He also sent a letter to Madam Yan to let him know if there’s anything Yan Wen wants to eat that can’t be found in the market. He would arrange for it to be sent from the palace.

Compared to Miss Ruan, Yan Ge had a better impression of Yan Wen. Miss Ruan was beautiful and appeared gentle, but her docility seemed somewhat unnatural, as if she was putting on a show for others. On the other hand, Yan Wen’s tranquility emanated from within, and her eyes showed no

impurities. She was simply a pure young girl. He hoped she wouldn’t disappoint Yan Su and the Yan family in the future.

Yan Su’s reply arrived quickly, expressing his overwhelming joy at becoming a father. Unfortunately, he had just begun his military service, and he would have to wait for more than two years before returning home. Yan Wen on the other hand, had no complaints and even wrote a letter assuring him to focus on his duty with peace of mind.

Yan Ge had inquired and learned that Yan Su had already adapted to life at Xiguan Pass and was performing well. He had requested Feng Zhun and Cao Zhan to secretly take care of him, ensuring that the new soldier wasn’t bullied by the veterans. Besides, Yan Su had spent several years in the officialdom, and his social skills were not inferior to Yan Ge’s. He already had a good relationship with the people in the military camp.

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After pondering for several days, Yan Ge finally found a way to keep the resin soft.

On the day of the opening of the “First Company Umbrella Factory,” six different types of umbrellas were launched consecutively, causing a sensation in the entire capital. Among them, there were three types of bamboo frame umbrellas: bamboo frame cloth umbrellas, bamboo frame resin umbrellas, and bamboo frame waxed cloth umbrellas.

There were also three types of iron frame umbrellas: iron frame cloth umbrellas, iron frame resin umbrellas, and iron frame waxed cloth umbrellas.

The umbrellas varied in fabric and price. The cheapest was the bamboo frame cloth umbrella, while the most expensive was the iron frame waxed cloth umbrella, which cost eight taels. Iron was a precious material since ancient times, mainly used for forging weapons. Using it to make umbrellas was considered a waste. Even if the First Company had money, they couldn’t use it on too many iron frame umbrellas as it would be wasteful. Therefore, only 500 of these umbrellas were produced. These umbrellas were not only exquisitely made, but they also had various designs. Some of the umbrellas for women even had decorative patterns along the edges.

Since “umbrellas” and “scattering” had the same pronunciation in Chinese, they couldn’t be given as gifts so Yan Ge sold some to Huangfu Yuchen at a price of one coin per umbrella.

The serial number of Huangfu Yuchen’s umbrella was the first, and Yan Ge kept one for himself and Yan Jin.

He also kept some for his father, mother, elder brother and sister in law, totaling four coins for four umbrellas. The little prince and the empress each received one umbrella, and the managers and long-term partners of the First Company received one umbrella each. This reduced the number by more than ten. The remaining iron frame umbrellas were sold out in just one day. The bamboo frame umbrellas also sold well.

The people of the First Company said that these umbrellas could be used not only on rainy days but also on sunny days to prevent sunburn, hence they were called “parasols.” Therefore, the next day, people suddenly noticed many individuals carrying parasols on the streets, either from noble families or from respectable young ladies. These parasols varied in elegance, simplicity, and brilliance, creating a beautiful scenery.

Yan Ge heard some jokes on the streets — because they were too engrossed in looking at various parasols, people had accidentally bumped into trees. Due to this joke, the parasols became even more famous.

The main business of Yan Ge’s company was not umbrella production. He sold the agency rights for the umbrellas to four umbrella workshops at a high price. Moreover, these umbrella workshops had to pay a certain percentage of commission to the First Company for each umbrella sold. Of course, these agency workshops could only sell bamboo frame umbrellas and a few iron frame umbrellas since there were restrictions on iron purchases by the state. The common people also dared not buy too many iron framed umbrellas. If someone wanted to buy in excess, they might be suspected of trying to make weapons and rebel against the state, and would be taken away for questioning.

Walking on the cemented streets, Huangfu Yuchen observed children kicking a football by the roadside, reciting, “one plus one equals two, one plus two equals three, two plus two equals four…”

Inside the restaurants along the street, men were gulping down Drunk Immortal Wine. On the street, noble ladies strolled with their exquisite parasols. Everywhere he looked, people were using products from the First Company. Huangfu Yuchen’s heart swelled with satisfaction.

A passerby opened an umbrella, inadvertently blocking his view. Huangfu Yuchen swiftly approached and took a discreet sip from Yan Ge's lips, barely touching. He then maintained a solemn expression, as if nothing had happened.

Yan Ge's lips curved even higher, and he pretended not to notice. "Let's walk faster. I wonder how well-prepared they are."

At the southern city gate, several carriages continuously transported batches of grain and forage outside the city. Carriages entered and left through the city gate.

Could it be that the court was preparing for war? No, they had seen the huge embroidered banner hanging at the city gate that read, "Large-scale military exercise: Sponsored Enthusiastically By The First Company."

The court had posted a notice a few days ago, announcing a massive military exercise to be held at the southern city gate. If the common people saw the court transporting grain and forage, they shouldn't panic. Those who needed to enter or leave the city should go through the other three gates; the southern gate didn't allow passage for the common people. Therefore, the common people stood calmly in the distance, not approaching. Those who wanted to enjoy the spectacle did so, while those who wanted to set up stalls for business did the same.

The military exercise was scheduled to take place at the southern city gate. Inside and outside the gate, soldiers were busy setting up one tent after another, unloading the delivered grain and forage and neatly arranging them. The soldiers worked energetically, even though it was early October, and they were already sweating profusely.

About three miles south of the Jing River, at the fork in the official road, three young men approached on horseback. They noticed that the road leading directly north to the southern city gate was guarded by soldiers, exchanged puzzled glances and halted their horses.

"Several officials, may we inquire what has happened? Why is this road closed?" One of them dismounted and approached to ask, discreetly

slipping some silver to one of the soldiers.

The soldier didn't accept the bribe but scrutinized the three individuals before him. "Are you foreigners? Where are your travel documents?"

"Yes, we are merchants from the Mai Kingdom, here in the capital to conduct business." Tulan Zhong took out three travel documents from his bundle.

"Te Liao, Tulan Zhong, Tulan Yong…" The soldier carefully inspected them before returning their documents. "The capital is under the Emperor's rule. When you arrive in the capital, you must follow the rules and laws."

"Yes, yes, that's certain." Tulan Zhong stuffed the silver into the soldier's hand again. "Sir, about this road?"

Taking the silver, the soldier gestured to the side. "There's a notice posted over there. Our Emperor is holding a large-scale military exercise at the southern city gate, so it will be occupied. If you want to enter the city, you can go around through this road next to it and follow the people ahead."

"A military exercise?" Te Liao, the handsome and young man with outstanding temperament inquired. "What is a military exercise?"

The soldiers avoided answering this time. "If you want to enter the city, go that way," they said.

Te Liao nodded slightly to Tulan Zhong, who then handed a silver ingot to the soldier.

The soldier declined to accept it and spoke calmly, "If you don't catch up with the people ahead, you might get lost."

Helpless, Tulan Zhong mounted his horse, and the three of them rode off.

Over there, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen arrived at the foot of the city walls. The Commander of the Imperial Guards, Yang Zhuo, Prime Minister Wu, Jiang Guangyuan, Prime Minister Wei, Zhang Yingjie, Sun Yingxiong, and others hurriedly came forward to greet them.

“Greetings to the Emperor and Yan Caiqing.”

“Please rise,” Huangfu Yuchen asked, “How are the preparations coming along?”

Yang Zhuo replied, “We should be fully prepared in about another hour.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “This military exercise will still last for five days. You can arrange it as you see fit. However, Yan Caiqing has invested a lot in sponsoring this military exercise, so I hope your performance won’t disappoint us and won’t waste Yan Caiqing’s efforts.”

Yang Zhuo and the others quickly responded, “We will do our utmost and will not let the Emperor or Yan Caiqing down.”

Huangfu Yuchen continued, “To save time, there is no need to reassign the enemy and defending forces.”

In other words, it will remain the same as last time. Sun Yingxiong and Zhang Yingjie would continue as the defending forces of the capital, while Yang Zhuo would remain as the enemy commander. This arrangement was also a test of the generals’ ability to adapt to unexpected situations.

The city gate was tightly closed, and the enemy’s objective was to breach the southern city gate. The area open for attack was limited to the city walls within a five-mile range to the west and east of the southern city gate. On the city wall of the southern gate, there was a black flag. The attacking side had to remove the black flag and replace it with a red flag to claim victory. If the five days passed and the attacking side still couldn’t hoist the red flag, it would be considered a victory for the defending side.

“Xiao Ge, let’s go up and take a look,” Huangfu Yuchen said, pulling Yan Ge along as they ascended the steps.

They climbed up the city wall, walked to the edge, and observed the preparations of both sides.

Yan Ge fanned himself and said, “Both sides are in a state of tension. I have a feeling that this exercise will be quite spectacular. Yuchen, let’s go to a suitable place to observe the battle when the time comes.”

Zhang Yingjie secretly wiped his sweat. He had asked before- Yan Caiqing hadn’t intervened in the previous exercise, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t get involved this time.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “That’s my intention as well.”

Sun Yingxiong and Zhang Yingjie remained calm. Any variable could arise on the battlefield, and if they couldn’t accept that, they wouldn’t be qualified to lead troops in battle.

Not far from the city gate, the three young men stood beside their horses, looking at the fluttering banner that read, “Large-scale military exercise: Sponsored enthusiastically by the First Company.” Their faces wore expressions of surprise.

“I heard this military exercise will last five days, with nearly thirty thousand troops. It’s quite a significant expense. Yan Caiqing is truly generous!” Tulan Yong exclaimed.

Tulan Zhong added, “Not only this exercise. These roads… Oh, cement roads! I’ve never seen anything like them before. Great Han is truly extraordinary.”

Te Liao suggested, “Let’s find an inn first.”

“Yes.”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen arrived at Yang Zhuo’s tent. Two more chairs had been added inside.

Yang Zhuo said, “This siege will be more challenging because the enemy has the high ground and can almost observe our every move. If any of you have any ideas, please speak up. Let’s brainstorm.”

Jun Xiang proposed, “General, can we dig tunnels for a surprise attack?”

“We are stationed more than a mile away from the city walls, and we only have five days. I’m afraid we won’t have enough time to dig to the walls before time runs out,” Ah Fei shook his head.

Captain Liu suggested, “Launching a frontal attack during the day would result in significant losses. The period from the end of the hour of Yin to the beginning of the hour of the Yu is when the night guards are most sluggish. We can choose that time to launch our attack.”

“But the speed of the attack must be fast; otherwise, it will still alert the enemy,” Captain Luo added.

“So, we can only go for a frontal assault?” Yang Zhuo furrowed his brows. “Is there really no other clever approach? The enemy forces are similar to ours, so if we launch a frontal assault, we won’t have an advantage.”

No one spoke, and everyone pondered in silence.

Yan Ge also contemplated, staring at the sand table for a long time without finding a breakthrough. He nudged Huangfu Yuchen with his arm and whispered, “Let’s go out and conduct on-site investigations.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded.

As for Yang Zhuo and his men, there was no need for on-site investigations. They were the guards of the capital and often patrolled the city. They were well aware of every nook and cranny.

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Huangfu Yuchen led Yan Ge out of the military tent and walked towards a distance, introducing to Yan Ge along the way, “In general, when attacking a city, it is common to conduct simultaneous attacks from above and below. Some soldiers use grappling hooks or ladders to climb the city walls, while others use battering rams or ramming carts to break open the city gates. However, this kind of direct assault usually results in significant losses, especially when the forces on both sides are evenly matched, making it even more difficult to breach the city.”

Yan Ge asked, “Can we find the weakest point of the city wall and use a battering ram to create a breach?”

Huangfu Yuchen shook his head, “The city wall is the first line of defense for the entire capital city. The thickness is over fifteen inches everywhere. Unless the attacking forces manage to break through the wall fast, the defenders will be aware of the situation.”

Yan Ge chuckled and patted Huangfu Yuchen’s shoulder, “So you mean the capital city’s safety factor is quite high.”

Having been with Yan Ge for a long time, Huangfu Yuchen understood most of his modern vocabulary and smirked, “You could say that.”

Yan Ge pondered for a moment and burst into laughter, “If we could secretly send someone inside to quietly open the city gate, it would be much easier.”

Huangfu Yuchen sighed, “It’s not that simple. Even if someone manages to infiltrate as a spy, the other guards at the city gate won’t easily let them succeed.”

Yan Ge gave up and waved his fan, “I can’t think of any good ideas for now. Let’s go back and see if they have come up with a solution.”

On the city wall, Sun Yingxiong, Zhang Yingjie, and several others sat on chairs, discussing military strategies while keeping an eye on the movements in the enemy camp.

They also saw Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen’s figures.

Zhang Yingjie was filled with enthusiasm. “This time, we must win a glorious victory to show the emperor and Yan Caiqing.”

Sun Yingxiong nodded and said to his subordinate, “Spread the order. All soldiers will be divided into two shifts for rest. When it’s darkest before dawn, we will launch an offensive. Be prepared for a full-scale battle.”

“Yes!”

As the night fell, a dozen soldiers dressed in night attire appeared near the city wall, each holding an opened black umbrella.

Sun Yingxiong whispered, “After setting fire to their provisions, return immediately. We will drop ropes and pull you up. Speed is crucial.”

“Yes!”

The soldiers grasped the umbrella handles and jumped down from the city wall, gliding silently through the air, landing soundlessly about ten meters away. The brave warriors closed their umbrellas and, disguised by the darkness, swiftly made their way towards the enemy camp.

Yan Ge was bored and absentmindedly focused his consciousness on the movements at the city gate. When he witnessed this astonishing scene, he opened his mouth in astonishment.

Huangfu Yuchen kissed him to silence him. “What did you see?”

Yan Ge regretted that only them had witnessed this scene. Otherwise, it would have been a great advertisement showcasing the quality of their

umbrellas!

“The defenders used umbrellas to jump down from the wall and are now approaching our camp. Should we alert Yang Zhuo and the others?”

“No need,” Huangfu Yuchen replied. “Let’s observe for now.”

The two of them calmly lay on the bed, and after a while, they heard shouts outside, “It’s flooding!”

“Quick, put out the fire!”

Huangfu Yuchen snorted, “This fire has probably burned a significant amount of provisions. I will definitely deduct three years’ salary from Yang Zhuo.”

Yan Ge had no intention of pleading for Yang Zhuo; after all, it was his money that was burned. He calmly replied, “Make it four years.”

“Okay,” Huangfu Yuchen agreed.

In Yang Zhuo’s tent, he was raging in anger. Several soldiers who set the fire had been captured, but the problem was that they had lost one-third of their provisions. This military exercise was conducted with real weapons and combat, so the provisions were indeed burned. They also lost three tents.

“Didn’t I tell you to closely monitor the movements at the city gate?” Yang Zhuo questioned, his voice filled with fury.

The scouts responsible for surveillance were also puzzled. “General, we have been closely monitoring the movements at the city gate. We didn’t see the gate open, nor did we see anyone coming down from the wall.”

The soldiers who set the fire smirked, refusing to reveal how they had descended.

Yang Zhuo furrowed his brows. “Forget about it, let’s not dwell on this matter. Send the order to closely monitor the enemy’s movements.”

“Yes!”

Jung Xiang anxiously asked, “General, are we not attacking the city today? We have lost one-third of our provisions, and if we don’t capture it within three days, our soldiers will truly go hungry.”

Yang Zhuo raised his hand to interrupt him. “I understand that very well. But for now, we don’t have a good strategy. If we rashly attack the city, it will only result in needless casualties. Detain those dozen soldiers, keep a close watch on them. Perhaps they can still be of use.”

“Yes!”

The first night passed with no attack from the enemy, and the defenders remained silent.

As dawn broke, the city gate was opened, and Li Cong, a junior general, led a group of soldiers to ride out.

Jung Xiang also led a group of soldiers to meet them.

The two sides met in the middle.

Li Cong smiled and said, “Deputy General, General Zhang asked me to come and greet you. Do you still have food to eat today?”

The soldiers behind him burst into laughter.

Jung Xiang remained composed and said with a stern face, “Thank you for your concern. I’m not afraid to tell you that we still have enough provisions for three days. We have more than enough time to defeat you!”

“Very well, I’m waiting!” Li Cong laughed heartily and was about to turn his horse back.

“Hold on!” Jung Xiang shouted, “Vice General Li, since you’re here, why rush back? Dare you accept my challenge?” The losses suffered the previous night had dampened the morale of their side’s soldiers. If they could defeat Li Cong, it would surely boost their spirits.

“Why not?” Li Cong drew his sword and smiled arrogantly.

Jung Xiang and Li Cong then engaged in a fierce battle.

On the other side, Yang Zhuo paced outside his tent, furrowing his brows and pondering. After a while, his eyes lit up. “Spread the order. We will attack the city at dawn tomorrow! Tonight, we must prepare ourselves well and give them a great surprise in the morning.”

Jung Xiang and Li Cong fought relentlessly, unable to determine the winner. Both sides’ commanders had no choice but to call them back.

After nightfall, Yang Zhuo sent out a large force that mysteriously returned with bags of something. As soon as Yan Ge smelled the aroma, he knew what it was, and he eagerly anticipated the battle ahead.

When the first twilight of dawn appeared in the east, Yang Zhuo gave an order, and the whole army was mobilized and approached the city gate.

“Catapults! Ready!”

“Boom!”

The stones struck the city wall, creating a loud noise that alarmed the defending soldiers, who rushed to the city walls.

“Bang! Bang! Bang!” The sound of war drums echoed through the air as the defending soldiers beat them with intensity, resembling a summer downpour.

The resounding beats sent shivers down the spine, almost waking up the entire capital city.

Those who were still in deep sleep suddenly sat up in bed, anxiously listening for any signs of disturbance, only to remember after a while that there was a military exercise taking place at the South Gate. They breathed a sigh of relief.

Soon, the city walls became crowded with people. Yang Zhuo smiled with satisfaction. “Just as I hoped! Switch to the ash eggs!”

“Whoosh whoosh!” Grayish-white projectiles, the size of watermelons, were launched by the catapults and hit the city walls. A white mist quickly enveloped the walls.

“Ah, my eyes!”

“Ah-choo! Ah-choo!”

Chaos erupted on the city walls.

The so-called “ash eggs” were actually lime projectiles that burst upon impact, scattering dust and ash. It happened to be a coincidence that the construction of the main streets in the capital was already seventy percent complete, and with surplus limestone, the court ordered a partial reconstruction of the four city gates leading to the outskirts. There was a considerable pile of limestone by the roadside nearby. Taking advantage of the night, Yang Zhuo had ordered people to transport a considerable amount over. With the dispersal of the lime, many enemy soldiers temporarily lost their combat effectiveness.

“Up the ladders! Charge with the battering ram!”

Ladders were set up, and soldiers climbed up, rushing towards the city walls. The cumbersome battering ram, manned by fully armed soldiers, forcefully struck the city gate. In two other directions, soldiers erected climbing ladders and ascended one by one.

Sun Yingxiong was taken by surprise by the enemy’s successive attacks, but he quickly regained his composure and issued a calm order, “Archers, release your arrows!”

“Whoosh whoosh whoosh—” Feathers rained down as the arrows were swiftly unleashed. The arrowheads were treated, wrapped in cloth, and coated with special white dye. Anyone stained with the dye was considered

dead and voluntarily threw themselves off the wall. Thick straw was spread beneath the walls, causing no real casualties.

“Hah! Hah! Hah!” The soldiers responsible for the battering ram shouted in unison, vigorously ramming against the city gate.

Although the city gate was extremely sturdy, it gradually became unable to withstand the relentless assault of the battering ram.

“Bring oil!” Zhang Yingjie shouted loudly.

Jars of oil were poured along the outer wall of the city, instantly making the walls greasy. The soldiers who managed to climb up exclaimed a few times before falling back down.

Zhang Yingjie laughed heartily and shouted below, “Hehe! Consider yourselves fortunate that you’re not real enemies, otherwise, what I’d be pouring is boiling water or scalding oil!”

The people below helplessly got up, wiped their hands, and retreated to the side—they were all already “dead” soldiers.

“Fire again!” Sun Yingxiong, full of spirit, raised his arm and shouted.

Not wanting to be outdone, Yang Zhuo shouted, “Catapults!”

“Bang! Bang!” Several ash projectiles landed on the city walls.

“Ahhh!” The archers were disrupted, and the arrow barrage became momentarily chaotic.

“Ah!” Sun Yingxiong was also splattered, closing his eyes and smiling wryly. “Hiw did General Yang come up with this trick? Quickly bring water!”

“Yes!”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen stood under a tree not far away, nodding as they observed.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Both sides have performed well in this exercise.”

“Indeed,” Yan Ge concurred.

“Boom—”

The heavy city gate was finally breached.

“Charge!”

“Ouch—” Enemy soldiers stumbled and fell before they could even take a few steps forward. The soldiers behind couldn’t brake in time and fell one by one. Upon closer inspection, the ground was also covered in oil!

With a smile on his face, Zhang Yingjie held an arrow, appearing leisurely as he marked each soldier with a white dot. “Concrete roads are truly excellent. The oil doesn’t seep in even when it’s poured on the ground.”

Jung Xiang, who led the attacking force, was so infuriated. Before he could get up, a soldier from the defending side marked a white dot on him, leaving him lying on the ground in frustration.

At this moment, excited shouts came from the soldiers on the city walls, “General Zhang, we’ve captured General Yang!”

Zhang Yingjie chuckled, “Really? They were caught so quickly?”

Outside the city walls, Yang Zhuo was trapped in a large net, and his clothes had three or four white dots.

Sun Yingxiong’s four soldiers, at the cost of their lives, jumped down from the wall. Although they were shot and killed by Yang Zhuo’s men, Yang Zhuo was still caught in the net and hadn’t managed to free himself before being shot by the archers on the city walls.

Yang Zhuo was the enemy’s main general, and his “death” signified the defeat of the enemy forces. The military exercise ended successfully with a victory for the defending side.

Yuchen and Huangfu Yuchen exchanged a smile and walked over.

All the soldiers knelt down together, “Greetings to the Emperor, long live Your Majesty—”

“Rise.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Huangfu Yuchen transmitted his voice using internal energy, and his voice filled with majesty and depth echoed overhead, “In this military exercise, both the enemy and the defenders displayed remarkable strategies and quick thinking. You didn’t disappoint Us or Yan Caiqing. You all have worked hard, and in the future, you shall devote even more heart and effort.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty! We will not disappoint Your Majesty and Yan Caiqing’s expectations!”

Huangfu Yuchen turned to Yang Zhuo, “I will leave this place to you. Arrange repairs for damaged things immediately. This is the new design for the city gate, arrange for people to rebuild it accordingly.”

“Yes.”

Before leaving, Yan Ge said to Yang Zhuo, “Once you’ve sorted out matters, come to the Tenglong Palace. I have something to discuss with you.”

“Yes.” Yang Zhuo shuddered at Yan Ge’s meaningful smile, and he glanced at Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen appeared oblivious. He embraced Yan Ge’s waist and walked away.

MCUS Chapter 141

There used to be only Huangfu Yuchen behind the imperial desk, but at some point, it started having him and Yan Ge together. At first, the eunuchs in Tenglong Palace found it awkward, but they eventually got used to it.

“The national taxes will start arriving in the capital next month, right?” Yan Ge casually asked while looking at a document from the Ministry of Revenue.

Huangfu Yuchen handed him another document, saying, “Yes. But at the moment, I’m more concerned about the cement issue. Many local officials have already inquired about when the cement roads can be repaired in their respective jurisdictions. It’s only a matter of time before the news about cement spreads outside the borders.”

Yan Ge browsed through the contents of the document, frowning slightly. “Considering our financial resources, it’s impossible for the imperial court to bear the cost of repairing all the roads in the kingdom. What do you plan to do?”

Huangfu Yuchen was about to speak when a voice came from outside the door, announcing, “Reporting to the Emperor, General Yang requests an audience.”

“Let him in.”

Yang Zhuo walked in confidently, knelt, and performed the proper salutation. “I pay my respects to the Emperor and to Yan Caiqing.”

“Rise.” Huangfu Yuchen nodded at Yan Ge. “You may continue your conversation.”

“General Yang, please have a seat and let’s talk,” Yan Ge said.

“Thank you, Yan Caiqing.” Yang Zhuo sat down and clasped his hands together. “May I ask what instructions Yan Caiqing has for me?”

Yan Ge gestured for him to have some tea. “I have a favor to ask you, General Yang. But before that, I need to invite someone else . Xiao Changzi, go to the First Company and bring Deng Mama here.”

“Yes.”

Yan Ge said to Yang Zhuo, “General Yang, the matter I need your help with is related to Deng Mama.”

Yang Zhuo asked, “Please go ahead, Yan Caiqing.”

While Huangfu Yuchen reviewed the memorials, he listened to Yan Ge’s explanation.

Yan Ge said, “I recently wrote a book, which tells the story of a beautiful woman searching for her lost husband. I find the story very touching and plan to have a theater troupe perform it on New Year’s Eve as a reward for the hard work of all the employees in my company throughout the year. Deng Mama is one of the main characters…”

Upon hearing this, Huangfu Yuchen silently applauded his baby’s wit.

“But the problem is, I haven’t been able to find a suitable candidate to play the husband’s role. After much consideration, I believe General Yang is the best choice. General Yang, are you willing to help?” Yan Ge added pressure to his request.

Yang Zhuo felt somewhat embarrassed by the request. “I would be honored to assist Yan Caiqing. However, theatrical performances are usually better suited for literati and talented individuals. As a military general, I am but a rough person. I’m afraid I might disappoint Yan Caiqing. Besides, if I were to perform on stage, it might affect the image of the Imperial Guards…”

“General Yang, you’ve misunderstood,” Yan Ge smiled. “It’s my fault, I didn’t explain clearly. I only want you to help Deng Mama become familiar with the script until we find a suitable candidate to play the husband’s role. This doesn’t mean you will actually perform on stage. You know, this is my first time organizing a performance, and it’s crucial for me. So, this play must not fail. To be honest, this is a true story and Deng Mama is indeed the woman who traveled a long distance to find her lost husband. In other words, she is a married woman. And it’s widely known that General Yang is not interested in women. Acting alongside Deng Mama wouldn’t give rise to any gossip. You are a very suitable candidate.”

Huangfu Yuchen almost burst out laughing. Describing Yang Zhuo as “not interested in women” was quite fitting.

Feeling slightly embarrassed, Yang Zhuo replied, “If this play becomes a big hit, it will undoubtedly help Deng Mama find her husband. General Yang, I assume you wouldn’t refuse to help others, right?” Yan Ge applied more pressure.

At this point, Yang Zhuo could only nod. Even though he didn’t dare lift his head to meet the Emperor’s gaze; he could still sense the warning stare.

“I’m more than willing to help,” Yang Zhuo said.

Yan Ge pretended not to notice his reluctance and happily exclaimed, “Excellent.”

Xiao Changzi’s voice came from outside, “Deng Mama has arrived.”

Shortly after, a woman appeared at the door. She was in her thirties, the most mature and charming age for a woman. She walked in gracefully and performed a dignified bow.

“I pay my respects to the Emperor and to Yan Caiqing,” she said.

“Rise.”

Yan Ge introduced, “General Yang, this is Deng Mama. Deng Mama, this is General Yang.”

Deng Mama bowed to Yang Zhuo.

“Madam Deng, there’s no need for such formality…” Yang Zhuo saw Deng Mama’s face and was slightly taken aback, feeling an inexplicable sense of familiarity.

Yan Ge said, “There will be many people present during rehearsals, so you don’t have to worry too much.”

“Understood.”

Yan Ge called out, “Du Juan.”

Du Juan stepped forward, saying, “Yes, young master.”

Yan Ge instructed her, “I’m entrusting this matter to you. I’ve already told you what to pay attention to during rehearsals. I hope you haven’t forgotten.”

Du Juan replied, “Please rest assured, I remember everything.”

“That’s good. Take them downstairs and start practicing. General Yang is busy with official duties, so we shouldn’t take up too much of his time.”

Yan Ge’s words shattered Yang Zhuo’s hope of dragging this out for as long as possible.

Du Juan led Yang Zhuo and Deng Mama away. Only then did Huangfu Yuchen ask Yan Ge, “Baby, do you think this will work?”

Yan Ge replied, “Deng Mama mentioned that there were some unforgettable moments between her and Yang Zhuo. By recreating those scenes, we might be able to evoke some of his memories. The most unforgettable of them all is the day they got married. If everything goes smoothly, Yang Zhuo should be able to remember the past. Even if all that fails, they will spend time together, and perhaps feelings will develop over time.”

“But what if he doesn’t regain his memories and also doesn’t develop feelings for Deng Mama?” Huangfu Yuchen thought his baby was being too optimistic and wanted to prepare him for possible disappointment.

Yan Ge smiled confidently. “If that’s the case, we have one final step: finding an excuse for him to protect Deng Mama and accompany her to their hometown. If that doesn’t work… well, it means they are destined to be apart.”

“Both of them are fortunate to have met you, my love. It’s the result of their good karma over several lifetimes.” Huangfu Yuchen hugged Yan Ge’s head and gave him a kiss. “But I don’t like you spending so much effort on others. You even wrote a script specifically for them. Byt I’ll consider it as a favor to Deng Mama and Yang Zhuo, who have been of great help to us.”

“No, I was too busy during that time. I didn’t have time to write a script,” Yan Ge deliberately messed up his hair. “I only provided the idea, and Du Juan wrote the script based on Deng Ma’s account.”

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled and held him tightly around the waist, kissing his cheek, lips, and chin, drawing closer and closer.

Yan Ge pushed him away breathlessly. “Aren’t you supposed to review the memorials? Focus on your work.”

Huangfu Yuchen gave him a peck on the cheek and, without insisting, turned his attention back to the memorials. “Speaking of the national road repairs, I have two ideas. One is to find a way to get donations from wealthy merchants, and the other is to sell cement abroad and use the proceeds to fund the road repairs. However, while these two methods can alleviate the pressure on the treasury, they each have their drawbacks. Convincing merchants to donate money might not be easy, and if we sell cement to other countries, their infrastructure development might surpass ours, and I’m not content with that.”

“I’m also discontented,” Yan Ge nodded. “Cement is our invention, why should they use it before us? Naturally, we should wait until we have built

our own Great Han to a certain extent before selling it to them. In that case, let's go with the first method."

A warm current surged In Huangfu Yuchen's heart, and his deep gaze overflowed with a smile. He lovingly kissed Yan Ge's smiling eyes, nose, and chin, drawing closer and closer, his arms wrapping around him tightly.

Yan Ge pushed him away again. "We're supposed to review the memorials, remember? Focus on your work."

Huangfu Yuchen kissed his cheek and didn't insist, returning his mind to the memorials. "It's good to hear that you have a plan for the first method, but convincing merchants to donate money won't be easy."

"Not difficult at all." Yan Ge leaned leisurely against him, appearing very relaxed.

Huangfu Yuchen raised an eyebrow in surprise. "You have a solution?"

Yan Ge smiled mischievously. "I can tell you, but you have to agree to a condition."

"What condition?" Huangfu Yuchen asked.

Yan Ge said, "Let's live as commoners for a few days."

Huangfu Yuchen was taken aback. "You want to live as a commoner?"

Yan Ge smiled mischievously. "I want to see you experience life as a commoner."

Huangfu Yuchen rubbed his forehead. He knew that Yan Ge's ultimate goal was simply to see him make a fool of himself.

"Do you agree or not?" Yan Ge couldn't help but laugh at the thought of Huangfu Yuchen causing all sorts of funny incidents.

Huangfu Yuchen sighed helplessly. "Baby, would you be so cruel to me?"

Yan Ge narrowed his eyes and smiled. “Cruel.”

Huangfu Yuchen leaned in and bit his lips.

“Do you agree or not?” Yan Ge tilted his head, dodging his attack.

Huangfu Yuchen held him tightly to prevent him from dodging and successfully bit him, chuckling softly. “I agree. Why wouldn’t I? After all, I have you by my side.”

Yan Ge grinned mischievously. “Should we bring the Little Prince along?”

“Absolutely not!” Huangfu Yuchen quickly pleaded, “Baby, let me preserve some dignity as the emperor.”

“You’re so easily scared.” Yan Ge burst into laughter. “I was just teasing you. Since you agreed, let’s choose tomorrow as the day. Do you have free time?”

Huangfu Yuchen pondered for a moment. “I have no free time tomorrow morning. How about in the afternoon?”

Yan Ge firmly refused to let him find a way out. “Alright, tomorrow afternoon until the following afternoon. Regardless of the start time, we’ll dedicate a full twelve hours.”

Huangfu Yuchen sighed. His beloved’s wit also gave him a headache. He had a feeling that tomorrow would be quite disastrous.

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“Yuchen, are you ready?” Yan Ge asked as he walked out of the inner room holding a bundle, looking lively and enthusiastic.

Huangfu Yuchen wanted to pretend he hadn’t heard, but one could only hide for a while, not forever. “I’m ready.”

Yan Ge suppressed a smile. “How about we leave later?”

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “No need, the sooner we go, the sooner we’ll come back.”

“Exactly,” Yan Ge walked up to him. “Raise your arms.”

Huangfu Yuchen thought he was going to help him tidy his clothes, and a shallow smile of happiness appeared at the corner of his lips as he obediently raised both arms.

Yan Ge reached into the inner pocket of his robe and pulled out a silver note. Then he put his hands into the sleeves, taking out two silver ingots of ten taels each.

Huangfu Yuchen reached out to take them back. “Baby, these are for emergencies—”

“Confiscated.” Yan Ge ruthlessly put the silver note and ingots into his own money pouch. He then thoroughly searched Huangfu Yuchen, going up and down, front and back, even taking away all the scattered silver he had prepared.

Huangfu Yuchen rubbed his forehead speechlessly. He was certain that today would not only be miserable but extremely, terribly miserable.

Yan Ge reached out to rub his forehead, pretending to console him. His lips and eyebrows carried a restrained smile. “Having these won’t help you. As far as I know, farmers rarely have silver; they mostly use copper coins.”

“I know. I brought these because I was afraid you wouldn’t be accustomed to their food or lodging.” Huangfu Yuchen said.

‘Yeah right.’ Yan Ge didn’t expose him either. “Shall we go?”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. “Let’s go. Give me the bundle.”

Yan Ge handed him the bundle and leisurely pulled out a folding fan from his waist, swaying it gently. “Let’s depart.”

Half an hour later, the two of them arrived at a village on the outskirts of the capital. It was still early, and smoke rose from the chimneys of most households. Amidst the faint scent of food and rice, the entire village exuded a sense of tranquility and harmony. Occasionally, the sound of roosters crowing and dogs barking could be heard, but it didn’t disrupt the peaceful atmosphere.

A faint smile appeared on the corners of Huangfu Yuchen’s lips. If he truly lived with his beloved in such a serene village, it would be an enjoyable experience.

Yan Ge strolled up to the entrance of a courtyard and knocked on the door.

A woman’s voice came from inside. “I’m coming.”

In a moment, an elderly woman with a cloth wrapped around her head opened the door and looked at them curiously. “Who are you?”

Yan Ge said, “Auntie, we’ve come to experience life here. Can we bother you for a moment?”

“Experience life?” The woman looked puzzled.

Yan Ge said, “Here’s the thing. From now until this time tomorrow, the two of us would like to stay at your house. You and your family can temporarily

stay at your relatives' or friends' houses. We will help with whatever chores you have to do today. Of course, we won't freeload at your house. You can hold onto this silver ingot."

"This…" The woman stared wide-eyed at the silver. "This must be five taels, right? Wait a moment."

Before Yan Ge could react, the door slammed shut.

Huangfu Yuchen quickly said, "Baby, it seems like this family doesn't welcome us. Shall we leave?"

Yan Ge fanned himself leisurely. "Don't worry, it's definitely not what you think."

After a short while, the door opened again, and the woman was accompanied by an old man of similar age.

"My wife told me that you…" the old man began.

Yan Ge explained carefully once again, and the old man took the silver and discreetly bit it, whispering to the woman, "It's real."

Then, he asked Yan Ge uncertainly, "Are you really going to do our work? The tasks on a farm can't be delayed."

Yan Ge nodded. "Yes. If we cause any losses, we'll compensate you."

The old man hesitated and said, "That won't be necessary. The silver you gave us is already more than enough. Shall we leave after having breakfast?"

"Okay." Yan Ge agreed readily.

After the elderly couple had breakfast, washed the dishes, and tidied the kitchen, they explained to Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen what tasks needed to be done in the house. Then, they led them to the vegetable garden and fields, explaining the work that needed to be done there as well. Finally, they handed them the keys and asked them to lock the door when they left.

The elderly couple packed a few clothes and went to their relatives' house.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen entered the house. First, they took a tour of the rooms. This family's house was very simple, consisting of three main rooms, a kitchen, a hall, and a bedroom. In the yard, there was a chicken coop and a pigsty, nothing more.

The smell from the pigsty made both of them wrinkle their noses.

"Baby, should we find another place?"

Yan Ge also regretted it a bit. Huangfu Yuchen used to be a noble crown prince and now he was an esteemed emperor. Not only had he never lived in such an environment before, he had never even experienced a few minutes of such an environment. There was no need to make it difficult for him. Looking at Huangfu Yuchen's uncomfortable expression, Yan Ge felt a pang of heartache.

"Forget it, let's go back, Zirui."

Huangfu Yuchen didn't understand and held him back. "Why do you suddenly want to go back when everything is fine?"

Yan Ge smiled and didn't speak, leaning over to kiss him.

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled lightly. "Let's go inside first."

Although the room was simple, it was clean. Yan Ge sat on the edge of the bed and opened the bundle.

Huangfu Yuchen looked around the room, not sure whether to stand or sit. He raised an eyebrow as he looked at the patched clothes in Yan Ge's hands and said with a vein popping on his forehead, "Um, where did you find these patched clothes?"

Yan Ge said proudly, "Du Juan made them for me last night. How about it? Don't they look like poor people's clothes? Here, one for you and one for me."

Huangfu Yuchen sighed silently. Fine, his beloved had such strange interests. He would accompany him even if it meant giving up his life.

The two of them put on the patched clothes and couldn't help but burst into laughter as they looked at each other.

Yan Ge recalled what the couple had instructed before leaving. "Let's go to the vegetable garden and pick vegetables to sell in the city." He glanced around and saw a pair of bamboo baskets in the corner of the yard, and a carrying pole leaning against the yard wall.

"Zirui, do you want to carry it, or should I?" Yan Ge asked.

"I'll do it." Huangfu Yuchen walked over and shouldered the pole.

Yan Ge praised him generously. "Not bad, you're a quick learner."

Huangfu Yuchen asked, "Are you sure that's a compliment?"

"Absolutely." Yan Ge replied cheerfully. He went into the house and took out two straw hats woven from wheat straws, putting one on Huangfu Yuchen and one on himself. The two noble young men instantly transformed into two rural farmers.

Suppressing his laughter, Yan Ge said, "Let's go to the vegetable garden."

Walking on the country path with the carrying pole, Yan Ge looked at Huangfu Yuchen's stiff figure and felt extremely satisfied.

"Zirui, when we sell the vegetables, try to get a higher price if possible. We can't cook today, so we might have to rely on the money from selling vegetables to have lunch at a small restaurant in the city."

A sense of desolation washed over Huangfu Yuchen. "Baby, are you kidding me?"

"No." Yan Ge urged him forward, pushing his back. "Hurry up, the sooner we go, the better price we can get."

When they arrived at the couple's vegetable garden, Yan Ge sat down on the ridge.

Huangfu Yuchen raised an eyebrow.

Yan Ge said confidently, "I'm playing the role of a lazy person now, and you're responsible for raising me."

Huangfu Yuchen laughed and said dotingly, "Alright, I'll take care of you."

He turned his head and glanced at the rows of vegetables in the garden, then crouched down and pulled out a big, fat cabbage. After filling a basket, he moved on to the next row and continued pulling. As he pulled with enthusiasm, he heard strange laughter behind him. He turned around and saw Yan Ge who was red from suppressing laughter. He desperately tried to hold it in while pounding the ground.

"What's wrong?"

"Pfftt… Hahahaha…" Yan Ge pointed at the vegetables he was pulling and laughed uncontrollably. "You… you…"

Huangfu Yuchen walked over helplessly and patted him on the back, "Okay, breathe. What did I do wrong? I thought you were mentally prepared."

"Hahaha…" Yan Ge laughed and leaned on him. "You…you're pulling the leaves… the radishes are underground… Hahahaha…"

"Seeing you laugh so happily is worth it." Huangfu Yuchen purposely touched his face and went to dig the radishes underground. He actually dug up some bright red radishes and couldn't help but laugh too.

After filling the second basket, the two of them changed their appearances using disguise techniques and carried the heavy burdens to the market.

Huangfu Yuchen still carried the heavy load while Yan Ge walked empty-handed beside him. As they walked, they unconsciously joined the other market-goers, listening to their amusing conversations. By chance, there

was another male couple among the crowd, one carrying a burden and the other holding a basket on his arm, filled with eggs.

“Brother, this must be your wife, right?” a vegetable farmer pointed at Yan Ge and asked Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded.

Yan Ge blushed.

“You really dote on your wife,” another man teased with a smile.

Yan Ge interrupted, “Actually, he’s my wife.”

The man said, “Then you’re in the wrong. Your wife carries your weight at night and still carries such heavy things during the day. You don’t know how to cherish people!”

It was normal for men to speak some vulgar words among themselves, without any ill intent so everyone burst into laughter.

Yan Ge opened his mouth but couldn’t say anything.

Huangfu Yuchen smirked.

Yan Ge walked a few steps over and snatched the burden away. “I’ll carry it!”

Huangfu Yuchen suppressed his laughter and let him.

Once they entered the city, they looked around in confusion. Where should they sell the vegetables?

The man who had joked with them pointed them in the right direction. “Is this your first time in the city? Go that way; there’s a market specifically for selling vegetables.”

“Thank you.”

Yan Ge expressed his gratitude and, with Huangfu Yuchen, arrived at the market. At the entrance, they paid six coins to the soldiers in charge of managing the market and found an empty spot to place their load.

“Baby, how should we price these vegetables?” Huangfu Yuchen asked.

Yan Ge acted nonchalant and patted him on the shoulder. “You figure it out. Lunch depends on you. I’ll take a nap first.”

“Take a nap later.” Huangfu Yuchen took out a small dagger and skillfully carved a big radish into the shape of a galloping horse. “Look, it’s so exquisite. It should be worth at least one tael.”

Yan Ge raised his head weakly and looked at him. “Those who come here are here to buy vegetables. Who would spend one tael to buy a radish that weighs only three coins after you’ve carved it?”

Huangfu Yuchen: “…”

Yan Ge reached out and took the radish. “The carving is good. Make me a jade carving another day.”

“I’ve already started carving one but it’s not finished yet. I’m planning to give it to you as a New Year’s gift.” Huangfu Yuchen said.

“Hey, how much for this radish?” a girl who looked like a maid approached with a basket.

Huangfu Yuchen picked up the horse-shaped radish. “For an esteemed guest like you, you can buy this for just one tael.”

Yan Ge looked at him with admiration. Well done.

Huangfu Yuchen enjoyed his beloved’s admiring gaze and whispered in his ear, “Don’t worry, baby, even if I’m not the emperor, I’m sure I can still support you.”

Yan Ge raised the corner of his mouth. “I’m easy to support.”

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled. “Indeed.”

The maid rolled her eyes. “Hey, are you going to sell or not?”

“Selling.” Yan Ge took the money and handed her the horse-shaped radish.

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Huangfu Yuchen felt encouraged and swiftly carved all the radishes. He carved the large radishes into spirited horses and the small ones into rabbits or fish.

Yan Ge watched with fascination and praised him.

A crowd quickly gathered around their small stall.

“Wow, the carvings are really nice. How much are they?” someone asked.

Yan Ge replied, “The big ones are one tael each, and the small ones are five hundred coins.”

The onlookers glanced at each other and dispersed.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen looked at each other with bewilderment.

A vegetable vendor nearby chuckled and said, “Both of you have such skills. Why don’t you carve these small animals out of wood or something else and sell them? The people who come here are buying vegetables. Who would spend so much money on these things that can barely be eaten? The girl earlier was a maid from a wealthy family, and she just happened to pass by.”

Yan Ge felt embarrassed, so he used his straw hat to cover his face and whispered, “Zirui, should we leave?”

Huangfu Yuchen pretended, “No, we’re counting on them for our lunch money.”

Yan Ge felt depressed, but he couldn’t let Huangfu Yuchen laugh at him, so he acted as if he didn’t mind and said, “Alright, let’s continue selling. Buy a radish, get a small animal as a gift! Buy a radish, get a small animal as a gift!”

A large group of people crowded around.

“Oh, so they’re not real animals, but the carvings are really nice. How much are they?” someone asked.

Yan Ge said, “One coin for a radish, buy two radishes, get one small animal as a gift. You can pick any small animal you like.”

“Give me two radishes. I want the radish carved as a spirited horse!”

“I’ll take two radishes too. Give me the little white rabbit!”

…..

Within a few minutes, all the vegetables were sold.

Yan Ge made a gesture of wiping his sweat and said, “We solved it smoothly.”

Huangfu Yuchen asked, “Baby, I put effort into carving these items. Are they really worthless?”

Yan Ge quickly comforted him, “They’re valuable, priceless in my heart.”

Huangfu Yuchen felt helpless.

Yan Ge chuckled and asked, “Let’s count how much money we earned.”

Huangfu Yuchen also chuckled and the two began counting the coins.

Suddenly, several officials hurried over.

“Officers, these two are disrupting the market order! Arrest them!” an angry farmer pointed at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

One of the officials approached Huangfu Yuchen, his expression unfriendly. “You’re the ones selling radishes for one coin each?”

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “What’s wrong?”

The official said, “Radishes are one coin per catty today, and a radish weighs two to three catties, so it’s two to three coins per radish. Are you intentionally causing trouble by selling them for one coin each? Come on, arrest them!”

Yan Ge’s mouth twitched. “Run!”

The officials were dumbfounded. Where did they go?

“We forgot the baskets and poles!”

“Whoosh!” Huangfu Yuchen flew back, grabbed the baskets and poles, then flew away again. He didn’t have time to pick up the scattered silver and copper coins on the ground.

The officials gave chase. ”Catch them!”

“Stop! Don’t run!”

The market instantly became chaotic and lively.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen stopped in a secluded place, looked at each other, and burst into laughter.

“What’s next?” Huangfu Yuchen asked.

Yan Ge said, “Let’s go back first.”

The two left the city and walked back along the official road at a leisurely pace.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Radishes are one coin per carty. If each radish weighs three catties, then one radish is only three coins. With two baskets,

we could carry a maximum of fifteen radishes, which is forty-five coins. Farmers earn only forty-five coins per trip to the market. It's quite meager."

Yan Ge said, "We're even worse. We didn't earn a single coin from the market."

Huangfu Yuchen: "…"

"What should we eat for lunch?" Yan Ge asked.

Huangfu Yuchen rubbed his chin. "Hunting. I won't let my beloved go hungry."

The two of them caught two phesants on the mountain, returned to the farmer's house, and saw Gao Feng and Gao Yun standing at the doorstep with their horses. A few villagers were standing under a nearby tree, whispering in awe about how handsome the horses were.

Since the football team resumed normal operations after the last city-wide football tournament, Gao Feng and Gao Yun had been instructed to handle things. After , they continued to follow Yan Ge and assisting him. Seeing Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen's changed appearances and their rural attire, they doubted it was them.

"Gao Feng, Gao Yun, why are you here?" Yan Ge asked.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun finally recognized that it was Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge, and quickly knelt down to pay their respects. "Greetings, Boss, Young Master."

"No need for formalities." Huangfu Yuchen asked, "Is there something urgent?"

Gao Feng whispered, "In response to Boss, three merchants from the Mai kingdom want to discuss the cement business with the Young Master. We thought it was a matter of great importance, so we made inquiries and found you here."

“Merchants from the Mai Kingdom?” Yan Ge raised an eyebrow, opened the door with the key, and the group entered the house. “The cement business is the responsibility of the imperial court. They can find out by inquiring a bit in the capital. Why are they looking for me?”

Gao Feng said, “Subordinates don’t know.”

“That is indeed strange.” Huangfu Yuchen handed the phesants to Gao Yun. “Clean them up.”

“Yes.”

“Gao Feng, you go back immediately and have someone closely monitor those three men.” Huangfu Yuchen added.

“Yes.”

Yan Ge asked Huangfu Yuchen, “Do you think there’s something fishy about those three? Let’s go back after we finish eating the roasted chicken.”

“That’s not necessary,” Huangfu Yuchen scooped water from the water tank and handed him a wet handkerchief to wipe his face. “Since you like it here, let’s stay for two more days.”

Yan Ge said, “You know very well why I wanted to come here.”

“Do I?” Huangfu Yuchen pretended not to know.

“Forget it, if you don’t know,” Yan Ge replied.

“I really don’t know. Tell me,” Huangfu Yuchen leaned closer.

Yan Ge pushed his face away. “Figure it out yourself.”

Gao Yun squatted in the corner, cleaning the phesants, trying to minimize his presence. After finishing the cleaning, he retreated to the yard.

When the roasted chicken was ready, Yan Ge called him in and gave him half a chicken.

Gao Yun felt secretly delighted. He had better luck than Gao Feng. He had heard that the roasted chicken made by the Emperor was extraordinary, and today he had the good fortune to taste it. He took the roasted chicken, expressed his gratitude, and went outside to eat.

“Baby, can we discuss state affairs today?” Huangfu Yuchen asked seriously.

Yan Ge took a bite of the roasted chicken and glanced at him helplessly. “Who said you couldn’t discuss it?”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Since the rapid development of the economy in the capital, almost all the merchants there are making huge profits. Although the court officials don’t say it, I can tell that they envy them. So, I plan to increase the commercial tax revenue. Part of it can be used to subsidize agriculture, and the rest can be used to raise officials’ salaries. What do you think?”

Yan Ge nodded thoughtfully. There were reasons why ancient Chinese rulers often adopted a policy of focusing on agriculture and suppressing commerce. The policy of focusing on agriculture and suppressing commerce was a natural product of the feudal natural economy. The economic policies implemented by a country or regime are ultimately determined by its economic foundation and the interests of the ruling class. In feudal society, the economic foundation was a self-sufficient natural economy, and for the people, owning land was the best way to accumulate wealth. Stable rental income was the means to become rich. At the same time, for a feudal state, the development of agriculture could provide people with a stable life, promote population growth, and ensure a full treasury and granary. It could prevent internal famine, unrest, and external invasion. The current Great Han was just like that. Considering the current national situation, focusing on agriculture and suppressing commerce was a necessary transitional measure.

“I think it’s feasible,” Yan Ge said. “However, the development of agriculture cannot rely solely on suppressing commerce. Efforts should be made in agriculture itself. But the development of agriculture needs to proceed slowly. Currently, the most important thing is to develop the capital

city, and other cities can take the capital city as a reference. The increase in commercial tax revenue you mentioned should be done gradually. If the successful merchants start to complain, it will cause trouble."

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. "I understand."

After finishing the roasted chicken, the three of them returned to the residence. Yan Ge placed a silver ingot weighing five taels under the farmer's pillow as compensation for their delayed work.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen rode Gao Yun's horse, walking at a leisurely pace. Gao Yun walked a few steps behind.

Huangfu Yuchen felt much more relaxed on the way back.

Yan Ge intentionally said, "Yuchen, today's task wasn't completed. When will you make up for it?"

Huangfu Yuchen stiffened.

Yan Ge burst into laughter and Huangfu Yuchen bit his neck.

Yan Ge quickly stopped laughing. "I won't laugh anymore. Here, take this." He took out two pages of paper from his pocket and handed them to Huangfu Yuchen.

"What is this?" Huangfu Yuchen took the paper and glanced over it, understanding. "It turns out that you had already written it. Divide the official road into sections, and the merchants who contribute money can personally name the section of the road they have repaired. If several people pool their resources, they can erect a monument at the roadside and leave their names on it. What a great idea! Baby, your idea is truly marvelous!"

Yan Ge humbly said, "It's just an ordinary idea. The merchants who can afford to contribute money for road repairs are certainly wealthy. They are pursuing not only wealth but also fame and reputation. If they can spend some money to buy a good reputation that will be passed down to future generations, why wouldn't they do it?"

Huangfu Yuchen nodded in agreement. “You’re right. Once this news spreads, those merchants will undoubtedly be eager for it.”

Yan Ge said, “I’ve thought about it. When the time comes, I’ll also contribute money to repair a section and name it ‘Yan Ge Road.’”

“Let’s call it ‘Yu Ge Road’,” Huangfu Yuchen suggested.

“Yan Ge Road.”

“Yu Ge Road.”

Yan Ge raised an eyebrow. “Can’t I name it if I’m the one contributing money?”

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled. “Well, I can’t argue with that. A wife should follow her husband after marriage.”

The two bantered all the way into the city.

Gao Yun, who was walking behind them, endured the sourness in his cheeks from holding back his laughter.

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They passed by the company entrance, and Yan Ge returned to the company while Huangfu Yuchen went back to the palace.

Liu Rong came to report, “Young Master, three guests from the Mai Kingdom are waiting for you in the reception room.”

Yan Ge frowned, “Why are they still here?”

Liu Rong said, “Young Master, they insist on waiting for you.”

Yan Ge looked at him calmly, “If they insist on seeing me, should I let them? Should I let anyone who insists on seeing me meet with me?”

“This…,” Liu Rong lowered his head in apology, “Young Master, it was my mishandling. Initially, they said they wanted to discuss the cement business, and I told them that the cement matters are not under your jurisdiction. Then they changed their minds and said they wanted to talk about cooperation in pens and wine…”

“I’ll let it go this time, let it be the exception,” Yan Ge said in a gentle tone. “Even without me saying it, you should know that the First Company is not an ordinary business establishment. We need to be more cautious in all aspects. You are now in charge of the company headquarters. If you cannot handle problems more appropriately, how can I entrust you with more important tasks?”

“Yes, thank you for the guidance, Young Master. I will remember,” Liu Rong hurriedly said. “So, Young Master, will you still see them?”

Yan Ge m said indifferently, “Since it’s about pens and wine, let Manager Zhao handle them. I have other matters to attend to.”

“Understood.”

Te Liao and his companions waited for a while and only met with a manager. After discussing business with Manager Zhao as if nothing happened, they returned to the Inn where they were staying. As soon as they entered the room, the three of them changed their expressions.

Tulan Zhong exclaimed in anger, “Fourth Prince, Yan Caiqing is being too arrogant!”

Te Liao furrowed his brows and looked at him, and he quickly corrected himself, “Young Master…”

“It’s no wonder,” Te Liao said. “The Emperor of Great Han dotes on him greatly, and the people of the capital highly respect him. He is the most respected person in Great Han after the Emperor himself. It’s no wonder he has such a big attitude.”

Tulan Yong said, “Young Master, I don’t understand. If it was about the cement business, wouldn’t it be easier for you to negotiate with the Emperor using your true identity? Why start with Yan Caiqing?”

“Don’t ask too much,” Te Liao waved his hand. “You go and find out where Yan Caiqing usually goes.”

“Understood.”

Unbeknownst to them, there was a pair of ears listening to their entire conversation.

Not long after, the shadow guard reported the news to Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen was slightly surprised, “Fourth Prince of the Mai Kingdom?”

“Yes,” the shadow guard replied.

Huangfu Yuchen stood up and paced in the hall. “If I remember correctly, the Fourth Prince of the Mai Kingdom is Hu Maiti?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Deng Mande said.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Could it be that the Emperor of the Mai Kingdom, Hu Mailong, sent him to inquire about the cement business? But as far as I know, Hu Maiti is the result of a drunken encounter between Hu Mailong and a palace maid, so he is not favored. Why would Hu Mailong send him to Great Han? And why did he come in secret?”

Deng Mande remained silent and did not disturb his train of thought.

“Could it be that he’s here for Xiao Ge?” Huangfu Yuchen’s face darkened slightly. “Make sure to keep an eye on them, and also investigate the true purpose of Hu Maiti’s visit here.”

“Yes!”

“Also, I asked you to reinvestigate the Centipede Organization. How is the progress?”

The shadow guard said, “Reporting to Your Majesty, we have found out that the leader of the Centipede Organization is from the capital and has close connections with high-ranking officials in the capital. His last appearance was at the Cuiyu Pavilion in the capital, but the pavilion has been burned down. So far, we have lost all leads.”

“Close connections with high-ranking officials in the capital?” Huangfu Yuchen’s voice turned icy. “What does this mean?”

The shadow guard said, “This Is the conclusion we reached based on all the clues we have. In the six years since the appearance of the Centipede Organization, they have targeted over sixty wealthy businessmen and more than thirty officials. Some of these officials’ travel itineraries were kept secret. Having close connections with high-ranking officials in the capital is the only explanation as to how they know their routes.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded slowly, his face turning colder. “That’s right. If not for that, how could they accurately track our whereabouts during our southern expedition?”

Deng Mande said worriedly, “Your Majesty, please calm down…”

Huangfu Yuchen asked again, “Do you have any suspects?”

The shadow guard shook his head. “No, there are too few clues. They are very cautious, and unless they take action, our men won’t be able to track them.”

“You may withdraw,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

“Yes.”

Deng Mande noticed Huangfu Yuchen’s contemplative expression and tentatively asked, “Your Majesty, have you figured something out?”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “The actions of the Centipede Organization are indeed puzzling. Killing the wealthy for money is no secret; however, why do they target so many officials and nobles? It can’t be just because they hate officials or the court. If it’s about hating the court, why don’t they attempt to assassinate me? And as for dealing with Xiao Ge, it’s even more confusing. They have always wanted to capture him, but what is their motive?” He vaguely felt that he had touched something, but in his rush to pursue it, he gained nothing.

“Your Majesty, since you can’t figure it out, it’s better not to think about it for now,” Deng Mande said. “Now that you have set up a net, as long as they dare to take action again, we will definitely catch them! In fact, in this servant’s opinion, they definitely wouldn’t dare to act in the capital. The common people hold great respect for you and Yan Caiqing. Even if you and Yan Caiqing don’t have bodyguards around you, I dare say that if anyone dares to harm you or Yan Caiqing, the common people will fight to protect you.”

Huangfu Yuchen praised, “You are right about the second statement. Centipede wouldn’t dare to lay a hand on Xiao Ge in the capital, but I won’t risk sending him outside the capital either. So, for now, we can only take it step by step and see who loses patience first.”

Te Liao was completely unaware that his identity had been exposed shortly after entering the capital. Upon learning that Yan Caiqing was frequently seen in the “ West City Development Zone,” he dressed neatly and went to the new development area with Tulan Zhong and Tulan Yong.

Yan Ge had not been very busy with the company’s affairs lately. He only provided a development plan for the company and entrusted the implementation to his subordinates. The reconstruction of the capital posed a greater challenge for him, and once the capital became a renowned city, he would receive a system reward of 2 million taels of silver. Naturally, he was enthusiastic about it.

West City was home to many officials’ mansions and academies, and had a strong academic atmosphere. In the new development area, a piece of land was reserved for the imperial court, where Yan Ge planned to build the Chongwen Hall. As the political, cultural, and military center, it was necessary to provide a platform for scholars to communicate. Chongwen Hall would be constructed with bricks and cement, and it would not only house a rich collection of books but also provide opportunities for scholars to learn and exchange ideas, including poetry, literature, and calligraphy.

On the other hand, East City was filled with brothels and gambling dens. When planning the capital, Yan Ge bought a piece of land in the new development area in East City. He planned to build an entertainment city, and recently he had found time to complete the design. In the entertainment city, there would be singing and dancing performances, storytelling, drama, and various delicacies, making it the liveliest place in the capital. Both Chongwen Hall and the entertainment city would be constructed simultaneously, indicating how busy he would be.

“Young Master, have a drink of water,” Du Juan handed a water jug to Yan Ge.

Yan Ge took a sip of water and said to Gao Feng, “Make sure the workers pay attention to safety.”

“Young Master, you can rest assured,” Gao Feng said.

Gao Yun said, “Young Master, there’s something I don’t understand.”

Yan Ge said, “Oh? Just say it.”

Gao Yun said, “According to Young Master, the first floor of the Chongwen Hall will be the library, and the second floor will be the exchange room. I think it would be better to put the library on the second floor since it’s quieter than the first floor.”

Yan Ge nodded, “You’re right, but we need to consider one situation. The books in the library are extremely precious. If we place the library on the second floor and there’s a water leakage, it will cause significant losses before we can put out the fire. That’s why I decided to put the library on the first floor.”

“I see,” Gao Yun suddenly realized. “Young Master, your consideration is indeed thoughtful.”

A gentle male voice came from behind them: “I suppose you must be Yan Caiqing.”

Yan Ge turned around, and a few steps away stood three individuals. From their positions, it was clear that there was a master and two servants. All three had distinct features, and it was apparent that they were not from Great Han.

“Who are you?” Gao Feng stepped forward and asked.

Te Liao clasped his hands and said, “I am Te Liao, a merchant from Mai Kingdom. These two are my bodyguards, Tulan Zhong and Tulan Yong. Greetings, Yan Caiqing.”

Tulan Zhong and Tulan Yong followed suit and saluted, “Greetings, Yan Caiqing.”

Yan Ge looked at Te Liao with surprise. This person was probably the most beautiful person he had ever seen. His features were exquisite, surpassing even Song Ruhao in beauty.

Te Liao allowed him to scrutinize him, a faint smile forming at the corners of his lips, enhancing his captivating charm. A meaningful emotion flickered in his eyes.

Yan Ge carefully examined Te Liao and asked, “From your appearance, you look like a woman dressing up as a man, but your voice suggests otherwise. Are you a man?”

Te Liao’s face darkened slightly. “I am indeed a man.”

Yan Ge smiled apologetically. “I apologize for my impoliteness. Please forgive me.”

Te Liao replied, “Not at all. It is I who rudely disturbed Yan Caiqing, and I am the one at fault.”

Yan Ge said, “If I’m not mistaken, you are the three individuals who visited our company a few days ago, right?”

Te Liao confirmed, “That is correct. I wish to discuss a major business deal with Yan Caiqing. Can Yan Caiqing spare some time for a detailed discussion?”

Yan Ge chuckled lightly . “If you want to discuss the cement business, you can approach the officials in the Ministry of Works.”

Te Liao clarified, “It’s not about that. I know that the cement business falls under the jurisdiction of your esteemed kingdom’s Ministry of Works. I am here to discuss other aspects of cooperation with Yan Caiqing. I must confess, I hold a considerable amount of wealth in the business circles of Mai Kingdom. This collaboration would encompass various aspects of your esteemed company’s business.”

Yan Ge dismissed it casually. “Other matters can be discussed with the managers of our company. They will surely attend to you well.”

Te Liao hesitated. “I believe Yan Caiqing might have misunderstood. I want to discuss a major business deal with Yan Caiqing personally. How about I

play the host, and we can talk while enjoying a meal?”

Yan Ge found it amusing. After the initial stages of the company, he often discussed business with renowned merchants over a meal. However, that was no longer the case. Firstly, because the merchants were apprehensive about his identity as an imperial consort, so any business matters were usually handled by the company’s managers. Secondly, his subordinates were capable and didn’t require his personal involvement.

This Te Liao seemed to hold himself in high regard. What made him think his business was worth his time for dining and entertainment? Either he hadn’t done his research properly, or he had ulterior motives.

“If you truly wish to discuss business, please approach the managers of my company. If you don’t want to, you are free to leave. I have other matters to attend to. I apologize for any inconvenience caused.”

Te Liao exclaimed in surprise, “Aren’t you afraid of missing out on a major business deal?”

Yan Ge nonchalantly replied, “There are plenty of people who want to do business with me. You’re not the only one.”

With that, he turned to Gao Feng and Gao Yun, saying, “Go and check the construction site in the back.”

“Yes.”

Te Liao watched as Yan Ge gradually moved away, his face growing dark.

“Young Master,” Tulan Zhong whispered, “I really don’t understand why you’re so interested in Yan Caiqing.”

Te Liao didn’t answer. He quickly caught up to Yan Ge and said, “Yan Caiqing, I am actually the Fourth Prince of Mai Kingdom, Hu Maiti.” He waited for Yan Ge’s surprised expression.

Yan Ge, who hadn’t received any information from Huangfu Yuchen, was taken aback internally, but his face remained calm. He looked at Te Liao

with a composed gaze, seemingly smiling but not quite.

Te Liao thought to himself that Yan Ge was indeed worthy of the person who built a successful company and reconstructed the capital. Just this level of composure was beyond the reach of ordinary people. He felt a bit embarrassed and continued, “I was just joking about discussing business over a meal. Please don’t mind, Yan Caiqing.”

Yan Ge calmly replied, “Are you joking? If you truly are the Fourth Prince of Mai Kingdom, then you should know that treating another kingdom’s emperor’s consort in such a manner is disrespectful.”

Hu Maiti explained, “When I saw Yan Caiqing, I felt a sense of familiarity, so I was a little too forward. Please forgive me.”

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Hu Maiti's statement was somewhat ambiguous. Yan Ge smiled and said, "Is that so? I find your age quite vague as well. It could be anywhere from fifteen or sixteen to twenty-eight or twenty-nine." The word "also" was quite thought-provoking.

Hu Maiti's smile froze.

Yan Ge smiled apologetically, "I didn't mean anything by it. Please don't read too much into it. Gao Feng!"

Gao Feng stepped forward, "I'm here!"

"The Fourth Prince has come from afar as a guest. Take the Fourth Prince to the palace immediately, so that it doesn't spread and make others think we lack manners."

"Yes." Gao Feng gestured to Hu Maiti, "Fourth Prince, please."

Hu Maiti gave Yan Ge a deep look and followed Gao Feng as they left.

Huangfu Yuchen had received the news beforehand from the shadow guards. Although he had not yet seen Hu Maiti, he already had a negative impression of this person . What kind of decorum did this prince display by pestering his beloved?

"Prince Hu Maiti has met Your Highness, Huangfu." This was Hu Maiti's first meeting with Huangfu Yuchen. His extraordinary appearance and cold and imposing aura made Hu Maiti inwardly exclaim in admiration.

Huangfu Yuchen's expression remained emotionless. "There's no need for such formality, Fourth Prince. Please, have a seat. I'll serve you tea."

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “The Fourth Prince has come from afar with only two attendants, and they entered the capital in plain clothes. Could it be that you encountered some trouble within our Great Han Kingdom?”

Hu Maiti was secretly alarmed. He had revealed his identity to Yan Ge just a moment ago but Huangfu Yuchen had already affirmed that he had only brought two guards with him. It was likely that Huangfu Yuchen had already learned about his identity and investigated him. He had heard that although the new emperor of the Great Han Kingdom was young, he was by no means weak or easily deceived. The rumors were indeed true.

“Thank you for your concern, Your Majesty. That’s not the case. I came quietly to simplify matters.”

“I see.” Huangfu Yuchen continued, “I wonder if the Fourth Prince’s visit is for official business or personal matters?”

Hu Maiti replied, “I dare not deceive Your Majesty. I came for the purpose of purchasing cement. However, I have inquired at the Ministry of Works and learned that the current cement production in Great Han Kingdom is only sufficient for domestic use, and there is no capacity for exports.”

His frankness only made Huangfu Yuchen more cautious. People born in the imperial family would never have simple intentions.

“The Fourth Prince must have anticipated that the purchase of cement would not be successful, which is why you only brought two people to the capital. It truly showcases your extraordinary wisdom,” Huangfu Yuchen remarked.

Hu Maiti paused subtly. “Your Majesty, you overpraise me. I came as a merchant, originally planning to arrange transportation for the cement directly in the capital if the negotiations went smoothly.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. “Then, what are your plans next, Fourth Prince?”

Hu Maiti replied, “To be honest, I am captivated by the bustling and exquisite atmosphere of the capital. I intend to stay a few more days.”

“Welcome,” Huangfu Yuchen said. “Since the Fourth Prince has come from afar, I will certainly treat you well. With only two attendants by your side, it’s surely not enough. I will leave my four most trusted eunuchs to serve the Fourth Prince.”

The words “most trusted” cut off Hu Maiti’s retreat, leaving him with no choice but to respond, “Your Majesty’s attention is overwhelming. I am truly honored.”

“Qiao Lan, Miao He, Hui Ju, Ke Mei.”

“Here, Your Majesty.”

“During these few days, you will accompany the Fourth Prince. Make sure he feels at home.”

“Yes.”

Hu Maiti said, “Thank you, Your Majesty. I’ve heard from previous envoys who visited the imperial palace of Great Han Kingdom that your royal gardens are unparalleled. Would I have the honor of accompanying Your Majesty for a visit?”

Huangfu Yuchen was looking for an opportunity to test Hu Maiti’s true intentions. Upon hearing this, he nodded and said, “Why not? Please, I’m afraid I don’t know much about flowers, so it might not be interesting for the Fourth Prince.”

“You are too modest, Your Majesty.”

The group stood up and headed towards the Imperial Garden.

Outside the palace, Yan Ge felt increasingly uneasy. If Hu Maiti’s visit to Great Han Kingdom was merely his personal action, there was no need for him to voluntarily reveal his identity. It seemed that Hu Maiti’s arrival in Great Han Kingdom was mostly under the orders of the emperor of Mai

Kingdom, Hu Mailong. If Hu Maiti was indeed the Fourth Prince, it meant that Hu Mailong had more than one son. However, he had sent such a good looking individual. Could there be some hidden motive?

After taking care of matters outside the palace, Yan Ge returned inside.

Huangfu Yuchen was not in the Tenglong Palace. He asked the eunuch in the hall, “Where did His Majesty go?”

The eunuch replied, “His Majesty went to the Imperial Garden with the Fourth Prince.”

Yan Ge narrowed his eyes. “Visiting the garden? How many people are with them?”

The eunuch honestly answered, “There are more than thirty people.”

“Alright, you may leave.”

“Yes, Yan Caiqing.”

Yan Ge felt bored in the hall. He picked up a book from the shelf, read a couple of pages, glanced at the door, but saw no trace of Huangfu Yuchen. He turned a few more pages, looked outside again, still no sign of Huangfu Yuchen… There was a drum beating incessantly in his heart, unable to calm down. He believed that Huangfu Yuchen and the Fourth Prince would not encounter any problems, but they were spending too much time in the garden.

He put down the book and walked a few steps outside the hall, coincidentally seeing Huangfu Yuchen walking leisurely in his direction.

He quickly turned back and sat back on the couch, picking up the book again, appearing engrossed in it.

Huangfu Yuchen was puzzled by his actions. Suddenly, a thought came to him, and a smile curved on his lips. He walked briskly into the hall and asked, “Baby, where were you rushing off to earlier?”

“Oh, I was just getting up to stretch after sitting for a long time,” Yan Ge replied.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Then why did you sit back down again?”

“The stories in this book are too fascinating, I can’t put it down, so I came back to continue reading,” Yan Ge explained.

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at the pages of the book, “Oh, I didn’t know medical books also tell stories.”

Yan Ge remained calm and closed the book, looking up at Huangfu Yuchen. “You have much to learn. You seem to be in a good mood. Where have you been?”

“Could it be that the kitchen sent dinner so early?” Huangfu Yuchen glanced outside, “Otherwise, how come I smell a sour scent?”

Yan Ge’s face grew warm, but he maintained his composure and leaned closer to sniff him. “It’s because you haven’t bathed for a few days, so there’s a sour smell.”

Huangfu Yuchen surrendered to him, sitting beside him and embracing his waist. “I’m took the Fourth Prince to the Imperial Garden just to test his true intentions. In less than a few seconds, I handed him over to the palace attendants and then returned to the study. The reason I’m in a good mood is because I saw the reports from the Ministry of Works. It seems that all the streets in the capital will be fully repaired in about two months.”

Yan Ge picked up the book again as if nothing had happened, “I didn’t ask you, what are you saying so much?”

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled lightly, resting his chin on his shoulder, “Baby, don’t worry, no one can make me take a second look except you.”

“Actually, I’m concerned about that Fourth Prince,” Yan Ge said. “Don’t you find it strange?”

“Strange that the Fourth Prince is harboring ulterior motives?” Huangfu Yuchen took the book from Yan Ge’s hand and placed it aside, pulling him into his embrace.

“Have you discovered something?” Yan Ge asked.

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “While we were walking on the marble pavement in the Imperial Garden earlier, he stumbled—”

Yan Ge finished his sentence, “And then fell into your arms?”

Huangfu Yuchen quickly clarified, “He didn’t manage to. But baby, how did you know?”

“It’s not difficult to guess,” Yan Ge replied, not very pleased. “So, this Fourth Prince came for you?”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “I’m afraid it’s more than that. Don’t you find his attitude towards you strange too? If I’m not mistaken, both of us are his targets. His purpose is to come between us and sabotage our relationship.”

Yan Ge suddenly understood, “I wondered why Hu Mailong sent someone as beautiful as a woman. So, this was his purpose.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Now that we know his purpose, let’s find an excuse to send him away tomorrow morning.”

“Wait,” Yan Ge patted his knee. “I think it’s not that simple. If he came to Great Han Kingdom for the reason we guessed, then Hu Mailong should be very concerned about his safety on this trip. Think about it, Hu Maiti is so beautiful and has no internal strength. He must have encountered one or two people with ill intentions along the way from Mai Kingdom to Great Han Kingdom. But Hu Maiti is only accompanied by two people, and I can feel that Tulan Zhong and Tulan Yong’s internal strength is only average. Isn’t that strange?”

Huangfu Yuchen paused playing with Yan Ge’s finger. “You make a valid point. In that case, sabotaging our relationship is only his surface objective.

Bringing only two people, could it be…”

“What are you thinking?” Yan Ge saw his expression change slightly and quickly asked.

Huangfu Yuchen sneered, “Baby, if you were Hu Mailong, and Hu Maiti died within the borders of Great Han Kingdom, what would you do?”

“You mean, since Hu Maiti is Hu Mailong’s son, and he died in Great Han Kingdom, Hu Mailong would definitely…” Yan Ge was greatly surprised. “Are you suggesting that Hu Mailong intentionally sent Hu Maiti to his death to gain reason to attack?”

“He wouldn’t go so far as to launch an attack. Great Han Kingdom’s military strength is on par with Mai Kingdom, and the Xiguan Pass is extremely difficult to break through. Unless there’s a foolproof plan, Mai Kingdom wouldn’t dare to start a war easily.” Huangfu Yuchen analyzed the situation for him. “But using the death of the Fourth Prince as an excuse to demand compensation from Great Han Kingdom would be perfectly justified. Hu Mailong has never been fond of Hu Maiti. Suddenly sending him to Great Han Kingdom is already very strange. Apart from using him as a pawn and thoroughly exploiting him, I can’t think of any other possibilities.”

Surprise still lingered on Yan Ge’s face. “A tiger doesn’t eat its cubs. Can he really do such a thing?”

“Hu Mailong is someone who will stop at nothing to achieve his goals. I’m afraid our speculations are close to the truth,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

“In your opinion, does Hu Maiti know Hu Mailong’s purpose?” Yan Ge asked.

“That’s not important. What’s important is that we must ensure Hu Maiti doesn’t encounter any trouble within the borders of Great Han Kingdom. We can’t afford any unnecessary complications. I think it’s better to send him away as soon as possible.”

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At the state banquet, the cups were raised in toast and the conversation flowed.

After three rounds of wine, Jiang Gan spoke up, “By the way, Fourth Prince, you only brought two attendants with you this time. The Prime Minister is genuinely concerned for your safety. Tomorrow, a large caravan is heading to Xiguan Pass. It would be advisable for the Fourth Prince to travel with them.”

The hall fell into an instant silence. It was obvious to everyone that the Prime Minister was trying to get rid of this guest.

Tulan Zhong and Tulan Yong’s faces turned pale, then red and white.

Hu Maiti deserved to be a prince, he remained calm despite the awkwardness. He said, “Prime Minister, forgive me for misunderstanding your intentions. I was quite captivated by the beauty of the capital and had intended to stay a few more days.”

Jiang Gan chuckled, “The Prime Minister has taken that into consideration as well. Come forward.”

A palace maid promptly approached, holding a wooden tray in her hands. On the tray were some rolled-up paper scrolls.

Jiang Gan said, “These are paintings of all the famous scenic spots in the capital. It might relieve the boredom of your journey, Fourth Prince.”

At this moment, Hu Maiti could no longer control his embarrassment, and a blush appeared on his face.

Jiang Gan continued, “Fourth Prince, please don’t misunderstand. We are all very welcoming of your presence in the capital. However, as you may have noticed, the capital is currently undergoing renovations. Not only the Emperor but all of us ministers are busy. We are afraid of treating the Fourth Prince poorly and affecting the relationship between our two kingdoms. Normally, it would have been our soldiers escorting the Fourth Prince back to his country. However, apart from the guards within the palace, almost all the troops in the capital are deployed to various construction sites to maintain order. Hence, the Prime Minister entrusted the caravan to take care of the Fourth Prince. The Prime Minister feels ashamed and hopes the Fourth Prince can understand.” Jiang Gan himself felt helpless as well. After all, Huangfu Yuchen was not only his close friend but also his superior. He would delegate any difficult matters to him.

This finally gave Hu Maiti a way out, and he smiled with a guilty look. “Prime Minister’s words are true. I spoke out of turn. Thank you, Prime Minister, for your thoughtfulness and efforts. I believe I will still remember today’s graciousness and thoughtfulness of the Prime Minister when I return to my kingdom. A toast to Prime Minister Jiang!”

Thousands of miles away, in the Mai Kingdom’s imperial palace…

The elderly Emperor Hu Mailong, who was nearing sixty but still energetic, was reviewing memorials in his study when a spy reported, “Your Majesty, the Fourth Prince has returned. He entered our kingdom’s borders just two days ago.”

“What?” Hu Mailong’s face darkened, and he waved his hand dismissively. “Leave.”

“As you command.”

“Summon the Grand Tutor!”

Hu Mailong’s trusted minister, the Grand Tutor He Buyan, hurriedly arrived to meet him.

“Your Majesty.”

Hu Mailong stared at him with wide eyes, and his voice thundered like a bell, “Grand Tutor, didn’t you say that the experts you dispatched were the best of the best? Why did the Fourth Prince manage to enter our borders so easily?”

He Buyan quickly bowed and pleaded, “I have just received this news as well, Your Majesty. It seems that the Emperor of Great Han Kingdom either took pity on the Fourth Prince or saw through our plan. They dispatched experts disguised as a merchant caravan, escorting the Fourth Prince all the way to the border. The people I sent nearly succeeded several times, but these individuals ruined everything. Please forgive me, Your Majesty!”

“Pity the Fourth Prince? Are you trying to deceive me?” Hu Mailong sneered. “If Emperor Huangfu Yuchen truly pities Hu Maiti, why didn’t he just keep him in the palace?”

He Buyan lowered his head, speechless.

Hu Mailong stood up abruptly, pacing behind his desk. His expression and words revealed a deep sense of resentment and malice. “Must we just watch as Great Han Kingdom grows stronger? Once their power becomes formidable enough, Emperor Huangfu will inevitably expand outward. At that time, where will our Mai Kingdom’s people find a way to survive?”

He Buyan’s eyes flickered, and he took a step forward. “Your Majesty, I have an idea.”

Hu Mailong turned his head, stared at him for a moment, and then let out a cold smile. He returned to his golden throne and sat down, “Speak. I hope this idea of yours truly has value.”

He Buyan said, “Since, we cannot do anything about Emperor Huangfu Yuchen with our own strength for the time being, why not join forces with other kingdoms to exert pressure on Great Han Kingdom? Does Your Majesty remember Great Han Kingdom’s ‘New Dynasty Day’?”

Hu Mailong nodded. “On the third day of the third month, over six hundred years ago, the founder of the Huangfu Dynasty held the New Dynasty

ceremony, and to commemorate that day, the third day of the third month was designated as New Dynasty Day. A grand celebration is held every five years, serving as a reminder for future generations not to forget the grace of their ancestors. What is your suggestion?"

"That's right," He Buyan said. "It's already November, and we just need to patiently wait for three more months until Great Han Kingdom's grand celebration. At that time, we can join the monarchs of other kingdoms in congratulating the Emperor of Great Han Kingdom. Firstly, it allows other kingdoms to take the lead, giving us the opportunity to do many things discreetly. Secondly, Your Majesty can personally witness the current state of Great Han Kingdom. What do you think, Your Majesty?"

Hu Mailong contemplated for a long time. A sinister and resentful smile emerged. "Good, good, very good! Hahaha…"

…

Inside the palace stables.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen stood in front of the stable in riding attire. The stable housed over a hundred horses, each groomed meticulously and displaying a remarkable appearance. Just as modern men love cars, men in ancient times loved horses. Yan Ge could tell this from Huangfu Yuchen's enthusiastic descriptions.

They approached a black steed. This horse had a robust physique, and was noticeably taller than the other horses in the stable. Its entire body was black, with a patch of pure white long hair above its neck, resembling a pair of wings. While chewing on grass, it raised its head, and its two flawless, clear eyes gazed quietly at the people, seemingly able to peer into their souls.

"What a magnificent horse!" Yan Ge sincerely praised.

Huangfu Yuchen caressed the back of its neck and said, "This is a horse bred from a combination of Xiguan horses and Nanluo horses. Xiguan horses are sturdy with well-developed tendons, and they are resistant to

severe cold. Nanluo horses are relatively petite but agile, with incredible running speed. These two types of horses are commonly used in the military. This horse here is a breed that combines the advantages of both, and it even enhances those advantages. This horse is named ‘Bai Guan’ and is the offspring of Xiguan and Nanluo horses. However, perhaps because heaven couldn’t stand its perfection, it gave it a rather irritable temperament. Don’t be fooled by its docile appearance. Apart from me and the groom taking care of it, no one else has been able to approach it, let alone touch it.”

“Is that so? Let me try.” Yan Ge had taken a liking to the horse and didn’t want to back down.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded with a smile, and pecked his earlobe, “We are always together so we smell the same. Bai Guan should like you.”

Yan Ge narrowed his eyes at him, “Even so, if it likes me, it likes me.”

“Okay, okay. You try.” Yan Ge had martial arts, so Huangfu Yuchen was not worried that he would be hurt.

Yan Ge stretched out his hand to touch the white hair on Bai Guan’s head and Huangfu Yuchen was startled.

‘Baby, you should at least offer it some grass. It might bite you if you reach out your hand like that.’

He was about to stop Yan Ge when he saw Bai Guan glance at Yan Ge and then lift its mouth to lick his face. Then it calmly lowered its head and continued eating grass.

“Haha!” Yan Ge laughed happily. He leaned comfortably against the stable railing and rubbed Bai Guan’s white hair. He glanced at Huangfu Yuchen from the corner of his eye. “Isn’t this great? Even if it likes me, it’s because it likes me for who I am.”

“Alright, alright. Come and challenge me later.” Huangfu Yuchen pulled Yan Ge along.

“Afterward, Bai Guan will be mine,” Yan Ge asserted his ownership.

“Don’t worry, no one will compete with you,” Huangfu Yuchen reassured him.

The two of them looked at several more horses, but Huangfu Yuchen didn’t find any particularly appealing. They took a few steps forward, casually scanning the area, and then their gazes stopped abruptly on a chestnut-colored horse.

Huangfu Yuchen asked the stable attendant who was standing nearby, “What’s the story with this horse? I’ve never seen it before.”

The stable attendant replied, “Your Majesty, this horse was sent as a tribute just a few days ago. The people below thought it had wings, so they sent it to the palace, as wings carry an auspicious meaning.”

This horse was indeed exceptional, with a coat of pure chestnut color and two patches of white fur on either side of its abdomen, shaped like bird wings. At a glance, it looked like a pair of wings about to spread open.

Yan Ge marveled, “Impressive! Are you sure the white color isn’t painted on?”

The stable attendant responded, “My apologies, Yan Caiqing. I can assure you that it’s definitely not painted.”

Huangfu Yuchen carefully observed the horse for a moment and nodded approvingly. “This horse is indeed exceptional. If I’m not mistaken, it’s a Maishan horse, a breed from Maishan in the Mai Kingdom. Its physique may not be robust, but its body is slender and highly agile, capable of traveling long distances in a single day. It’s often referred to as the ‘Thousand-Mile Horse.’ Does it have a name?”

The stable attendant answered, “This horse was just delivered a few days ago, and I haven’t had a chance to name it yet.”

Huangfu Yuchen pondered for a moment and said, “Since it has white wings, let’s call it ‘Yunyi’.”

Yan Ge suggested, “How about ‘Baiyi’? It can be Bai Guan’s little brother.”

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “Baiyi doesn’t sound quite right. Let’s call it ‘Yunyi,’ which can also be Bai Guan’s little brother.”

The two of them selected their horses and were about to head to the riding arena when a palace maid hurriedly approached them. “Your Majesty, the Minister of War has an urgent report from the southwest.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s expression changed slightly. “Quickly announce it!”

“Announcing the arrival of the Minister of War!”

Luo Wei, who was in a state of anxious waiting not far away, approached with a stack of documents, almost running. “I have seen—”

“No need for formalities at a time like this.” Huangfu Yuchen took the documents directly from his hands and opened them to read closely. “There has been a minor conflict between our Southwest Garrison and the Youji Kingdom Garrison. Thousands of our soldiers disappeared without a trace after entering the Cuncao Valley. Later, when we sent people to search, those searching also disappeared. How is this possible? Where is this Cuncao Valley?”

Minister Luo Wei replied, “Your Majesty, Cuncao Valley got its name because no grass grows there. It is an extremely narrow and deep valley.”

“Is it within our borders or within the Youji Kingdom’s borders?” Huangfu Yuchen asked again.

Minister Luo Wei replied, “It is within our borders.”

Yan Ge, who was holding onto the two horses, listened nearby and found it increasingly strange. “Are you saying that Cuncao Valley truly has no vegetation at all?”

Minister Luo Wei replied, “Yan Caiqing, it’s absolutely true. As the Minister of War, I too have led troops in the southwest before. That place is indeed barren. It’s very peculiar, and the locals are extremely superstitious about it. We never go near the area.”

After pondering for a moment, Huangfu Yuchen said to Minister Luo Wei, “Convey my orders to the Southwest General. For now, they should refrain from sending more people to investigate. You will immediately lead an elite troop to the southwest to investigate the matter and, at the same time, inspect the training situation in the southwest on my behalf.”

“Yes!”

“Deng Mande.”

“Here, Your Majesty.” Deng Mande hurriedly approached with an empty imperial decree and writing materials.

Huangfu Yuchen wrote the imperial decree on the spot and handed it to Minister Luo Wei.

Once he had dealt with the official matters, Yan Ge signaled to Huangfu Yuchen, and the two of them walked to a distance.

“Yuchen, I suspect that the so-called Cuncao Valley probably hides a mineral vein,” Yan Ge said excitedly.

“Oh?” Huangfu Yuchen was very interested. “What makes you think so?”

Yan Ge explained, “Think about it, wild grasses are tenacious and hard to completely burn. They grow again with the spring breeze. If there is soil, there should be grass, but the Cuncao Valley has no vegetation. There must be something beneath the soil. If it really is a mineral vein, we’ll become prosperous!”

Huangfu Yuchen found his analysis reasonable after listening. “I will have Minister Luo Wei bring an experienced group of miners to investigate.”

Yan Ge suggested, “I want to go myself.” Even if ancient miners have extensive experience, it is still limited. He doesn’t feel at ease unless he goes to see for himself.

“Baby,” Huangfu Yuchen gently persuaded, “don’t you have many things to take care of in the capital? How can you leave? Those miners are experienced and will surely investigate thoroughly.” Once Yan Ge leaves the capital, Centipede will undoubtedly make a move again. With political affairs weighing on him, he doesn’t have the time to accompany Yan Ge to the southwest. How can he feel at ease leaving him alone?

Unaware of Huangfu Yuchen’s concerns, Yan Ge tried to persuade him, “The affairs in the capital are proceeding according to plan. Even if I leave for a while, there won’t be any issues.”

“But baby,” Huangfu Yuchen said, “I don’t want to be separated from you. Wait until I finish the current matters, and then I will accompany you. How about that?”

“I can go alone,” Yan Ge insisted. “There’s a more than eighty percent chance of a mineral vein there, and I—”

Huangfu Yuchen cut him off with a kiss, preventing him from continuing, to express his stance.

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Deng Mande stepped forward and interrupted Huangfu Yuchen, who was reading a book. “Your Majesty, isn’t it time to serve dinner now?”

Huangfu Yuchen looked at the sky outside. The winter days were short, and it was already dark. “Xiao Ge should be back soon. Serve the meal.”

“Yes.” Deng Mande smiled and said, “It’s cold today, and the Imperial Kitchen has prepared hot pot. Yan Caiqing will definitely like it.”

“Yes,” Huangfu Yuchen said, “keep the fire low.”

“Yes.”

After waiting for another quarter of an hour, Yan Ge still hadn’t returned. Huangfu Yuchen walked to the hall entrance in confusion but didn’t see any trace of Yan Ge.

“Send someone to the palace gate to check.”

“Yes.”

Huangfu Yuchen waited for a while longer, then suddenly realized something and his expression changed. “Someone, immediately go and see if Bai Guan is still in the stable, and send someone to Yongyi Palace to check if Prince Jin is there.”

“Yes!”

After about half an incense stick’s worth of time, the two groups of people returned almost at the same time.

“Reporting to Your Majesty, Bai Guan is not in the stable. The stableman said that Yan Caiqing took the horse around noon.”

“Reporting to Your Majesty, Prince Jin is not in Yongyi Palace. The people in Yongyi Palace said that Yan Caiqing took him away.”

“Yan Ge!” Huangfu Yuchen stood up abruptly. “Why don’t you listen!”

Yan Ge and Yan Jin, who were already in an inn a thousand miles away, were having dinner. Suddenly, Yan Ge sneezed.

Yan Jin smiled gloatingly, “Father must be scolding you. He won’t let you off when we go back.”

“Didn’t I leave him a note?” Yan Ge said.

Yan Jin’s mouth twitched. “You stuck the note on the top of the bed canopy. Do you think he can see it?”

“He’ll see it when he goes to sleep at night,” Yan Ge said. “Besides, I’m doing this for him. He won’t be angry.”

Yan Jin took a bite of the plump chicken leg, stared at him and said, “Why do I feel that although your words sound justified, you seem guilty?”

“Eat your chicken leg,” Yan Ge patted his head and changed the subject. “Bai Guan is really good. He runs steadily and fast. Minister Wei set off early in the morning, but they are a large group, so it’s impossible for them to be faster than us. I estimate that we can catch up with them by tomorrow noon.”

Yan Jian nodded. “We must catch up with them, otherwise we might lose them.”

As it turned out, Yan Jin was a little jinx. The next day, the two of them rushed on horseback and still hadn’t caught up with Minister Luo Wei’s team by noon. They had unknowingly taken the wrong road and had no choice but to return to Sanhu Town, inquire about the correct route, and continue chasing after confirming the information.

A day later, they finally caught up with the large group, who were resting by the roadside.

Hearing the urgent sound of hooves approaching, the Imperial Guards raised their swords in defense.

“Yan… Yan Caiqing? Prince Jin?”

On seeing who came, the Imperial Guards were dumbfounded.

Minister Luo Wei heard the commotion and quickly walked out from the back of the team. When he saw Yan Ge and Yan Jin, he was also surprised. “I have seen Yan Caiqing, and I have seen Prince Jin!”

“No need for formalities.” Yan Ge jumped off the horse with a smile. “Minister Luo Wei, you and your team ran really fast, but we finally caught up.”

Minister Luo Wei asked in confusion, “Yan Caiqing, why are you here?”

Yan Ge said, “The Emperor asked me to come with you.”

Minister Luo Wei muttered in his heart. The Emperor cared a lot about Yan Caiqing, and he rarely missed an opportunity to leave the palace with him. How could he let Yan Ge go to such a distant place alone? “Yan Caiqing, please forgive me for being daring, but did the Emperor really send you?”

Yan Ge said helplessly, “Alright, I came on my own. But I left a note for the Emperor, so he should have found out by now.”

“This…” Minister Luo Wei slapped his forehead. “Yan Caiqing, why are you… I will immediately have someone escort you and Prince Jin back.”

Yan Ge stopped him. “Since I have already come out, I have no intention of turning back. If the Emperor blames me, I will take full responsibility. It won’t fall on your head, so don’t worry.”

Minister Luo Wei hurriedly said, “It’s not that I’m afraid of the Emperor’s blame, but I’m worried about Yan Caiqing’s safety. This…”

“Alright, there’s no need for you to say more,” Yan Ge waved his hand, not allowing any more say about the matter.

Minister Luo Wei sighed helplessly. He had no other choice but to order the Imperial Guards to protect Yan Ge and Yan Jin. But he couldn’t help but wonder why Yan Caiqing had come and brought the little prince with him. It was such a cold day.

“Yan Caiqing, rest with Prince Jin. We can set off now.”

“Let’s set off now.”

The team continued on their journey.

They traveled at a fast pace and it took them half a month to reach Nanrun City, where the Southwest Garrison was located. The group headed straight for the southwestern military camp.

Wei Chi, the Southwest General stationed at the border had received advance notice and personally led his subordinates to welcome them outside the barracks.

“Southwest General Wei Chi and his troops respectfully welcome Minister Wei.”

Minister Luo Wei said, “General Wei Chi, first meet Yan Caiqing and Prince Jin.”

General Wei Chi had already noticed the young man in civilian clothes and the child in his arms, who were different from the military attire. When he heard Yan Caiqing’s identity, he was greatly surprised. “I pay my respects to Yan Caiqing and Prince Jin.”

Yan Ge smiled and said, “There’s no need for so much ceremony.” He had originally wanted to conceal his identity, but it would be more convenient to use his real identity if he wanted to intervene in the matter of Cuncao Valley.

General Wei Chi said, “It’s cold outside. Please come inside and warm yourselves, Yan Caiqing, Prince Jin, and Minister Wei.”

“Please.”

Once inside the house, General Wei Chi ordered, “Quickly prepare hot tea and some snacks that children like.”

“Yes.”

Feeling bored, Yan Jin lay in Yan Ge’s arms. When he heard that snacks were coming, he perked up and looked at General Wei Chi curiously. He had a favorable impression of this middle-aged man who seemed very friendly. He walked over, smiled at him, and squeezed onto the same chair with him.

General Wei Chi’s face showed a smile. He was not a person bound by propriety so he didn’t stand up to give way, but moved to the side of the chair to make Yan Jin more comfortable.

He touched his head and said to Yan Ge, “I have heard that Prince Jin is lively and cute. Seeing him truly makes one happy.”

“General Wei Chi over praises.” Yan Ge said.

After some small talk, Minister Luo Wei brought up the main issue. “General Wei Chi, what exactly happened in Cuncao Valley?”

General Wei Chi remembered the troublesome matter that had been bothering him. He frowned and said, “It’s like this. About a month ago, a group of soldiers from Youji Kingdom suddenly invaded a village within our borders, plundered it and run away. Our patrolling soldiers discovered them, and a small-scale battle broke out between the two sides. For some reason, our army of nearly a thousand men was forced into Cuncao Valley. After learning of the news, I immediately sent a group of soldiers to search, but they never returned. Normally, even though Cuncao Valley is deep, if we call from above, we should be able to hear a response from below. But after they entered the valley, there was no movement at all. I felt that

something was amiss, so I immediately wrote a report and sent it back to the capital. Now I am even more certain that something has happened to them. Otherwise, it's impossible for none of them to return."

Minister Luo Wei frowned and said, "Since no grass grows in the valley, I'm afraid that even if the soldiers were alive at first, they…"

General Wei Chi let out a deep sigh. "I also suspect this. But if we don't go and search again, I will feel regretful. We must see them whether alive or dead."

Minister Luo Wei said, "General Wei Chi, please rest assured. The Emperor has appointed capable individuals this time. I believe that they will have results when they enter Cuncao Valley."

General Wei Chi nodded. "You all have traveled tirelessly. First, replenish your energy with a meal, and after eating, we will immediately set off."

"Okay."

After finishing their lunch, Ah Fei selected twenty skilled individuals and, together with Minister Luo Wei, followed General Wei Chi's lead to Cuncao Valley. Yan Ge and Yan Jin also followed along.

Cuncao Valley could be better described as a mountain ravine rather than a valley. The entire ravine seemed as if the earth had been split in half by some internal force. The shapes of the mountain walls on both sides were almost identical, and if they could move, they would surely fit together. Whether it was the ground beneath their feet or the inner walls of the mountains, it was true that not a single blade of grass grew. Standing on the edge of the cliff and looking down into the valley, the uneven mountain walls blocked the sunlight and obstructed the view, making it impossible to see the situation at the bottom of the valley. However, it could be confirmed that the deep valley was at least a hundred feet deep, and the widest point between the two walls was about four or five feet. The narrow and cramped space looked quite terrifying.

Ah Fei asked, “General Wei Chi, do you know where they went down from?”

General Wei Chi said, “Please follow me. My men discovered traces of abrasion on this side of the ground. It hasn’t rained during this period, so the traces should still be there.”

While they were discussing important matters over there, Yan Ge squatted on the ground and examined the soil. He dug a few times with the iron shovel he brought but found no roots of any plants in the soil.

On the other side, the accompanying miners squatted on the ground, holding some clumps of soil in their hands, carefully examining them, and occasionally whispering to each other.

“Papa, is there really a vein here?” Yan Jin squatted, holding a small iron shovel in his hand and helping to dig the soil.

“We can only say that the possibility is high,” Yan Ge said. “There must be a reason for this. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be completely barren here.” He stood up, looked around, and said, “This area is at least four or five mu, and there is no plant growth at all. If there really is a vein, it must be of considerable scale.”

Ah Fei stood at the edge of the cliff and observed for a moment before saying, “We will descend from here. Everyone, check your equipment and make sure you have brought medical kits, three days’ worth of food, and water.” Yan Ge had given the idea of the medical kits. The soldiers in the army were issued one when they went on duty.

“Yes!”

After the soldiers finished their checks, Ah Fei continued, “I will tie a rope around my waist, and everyone should follow closely behind me.”

“Yes!”

After giving the instructions, Ah Fei turned to General Wei Chi and the others. “General Wei Chi, Minister Wei, Yan Caiqing, we’re about to go down.”

“Alright. Thank you all for your efforts and please be extremely careful,” General Wei Chi said.

“Don’t worry.” Ah Fei nodded.

The group of twenty-one people slowly crawled down the uneven rock face into the valley.

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Yan Ge walked up to the expert miners and asked, “Masters, how is it? Can you confirm if there is a vein here?”

One of the elderly miners, around sixty years old, stood up, approached him, and bowed before saying, “Replying to Yan Caiqing, when searching for veins, there are usually two methods. One is to observe if there is abundant vegetation on the ground, and the other is to examine the soil texture. It Is indeed suspicious that no grass grows here, but after careful investigation of the soil, we have not found any mineral content. If we want to know if there is a vein here, I’m afraid we need to dig deeper.”

Yan Ge nodded and inadvertently noticed a soldier under General Wei Chi who seemed to have something to say. He asked, “Does this soldier know something?”

General Wei Chi and the others also looked over.

“Captain Zhang, Yan Caiqing is asking you a question, so you should answer,” General Wei Chi said.

Captain Zhang walked up to Yan Ge, bowed, and said, “Reporting to Yan Caiqing, I’m from Dalin Village nearby. I’ve heard from the elderly that the reason why no vegetation grows here is due to frequent lightning strikes.”

Yan Ge’s eyes lit up. “Lightning frequently strikes here?”

“Yes, for some reason, lightning always seems to strike here whenever it rains.” Captain Zhang said.

Yan Ge smiled. There was only one reason why lightning would frequently strike a certain place. Other than the presence of the Zhantian Vine like in

Thunder Valley, that reason was the presence of iron.

“I see. It turns out that way. It seems I was being delusional. Well, let’s forget about this matter. General Wei Chi, as I’m new to this place, would you be kind enough to accompany me for a casual walk around here?”

General Wei Chi said, “Why not? Yan Caiqing, please. Minister Luo Wei, I’ll leave this place to you for now.”

Minister Luo Wei said, “General, please rest assured.”

Yan Ge held Yan Jin’s hand and gradually moved away with General Wei Chi.

General Wei Chi signaled for his accompanying subordinates to step back a bit and then glanced at Yan Ge. He smiled slightly and said, “Yan Caiqing, do you have something to tell me?”

Yan Ge raised his eyebrows. “How did you know?”

General Wei Chi said, “Yan Caiqing, with the achievements you have made, it’s clear that you’re not someone who easily gives up. You must have discovered something.”

Yan Ge respectfully saluted him. “I have indeed made some discoveries. General Wei Chi, as a seasoned warrior with extensive experience, you should know that lightning is attracted to iron.”

“That’s correct,” General Wei Chi nodded. “Not only does lightning favor iron, but it also favors tall and large trees.”

“Exactly,” Yan Ge said. “If my guess is correct, there is indeed a vein hidden beneath Cuncao Valley, and it’s most likely iron ore. That’s why lightning is drawn to this place. If there truly is a vein here, It would be a tremendous fortune for our Great Han Kingdom. I know that it’s not far from the Youji Kingdom’s borders, and once this information becomes known to them, they might become covetous. Therefore, I would like General Wei Chi to arrange for trustworthy individuals among those who

came with us to secretly lead the accompanying miners to dig deeper and explore."

General Wei Chi exclaimed, "Yan Caiqing, your analysis is reasonable. If what you said is true, it would be a great blessing for our Great Han Kingdom! I never expected that besides being skilled in business, Yan Caiqing is also proficient in strategy. I admire you."

"I dare not accept such praise," Yan Ge smiled. "I have learned a few tricks from His Majesty."

General Wei Chi laughed heartily. "Yan Caiqing, you are being modest. I will make the necessary arrangements!"

General Wei Chi immediately returned to the military camp and gathered a group of guards to Cuncao Valley who were originally stationed there to wait for news from Ah Fei and the others. Furthermore, he arranged for another group of soldiers to lie in wait near the border between the two kingdoms to prevent the Youji Kingdom from discovering any abnormalities on the side of Cuncao Valley.

Since there were only six accompanying miners this time and manpower was insufficient, some soldiers assisted them in digging under the guidance of the miners.

Taking advantage of this opportunity, Yan Ge took Yan Jin to take a stroll in Nanrun City. General Wei Chi assigned Captain Zhang and another soldier, Feng Run, as their guides.

Captain Zhang and Feng Run unexpectedly got a half-day break, and they were quite happy. They changed into civilian clothes and accompanied Yan Ge and Yan Jin into the city.

In the southwestern region, there were not only many mountains but also forests. The scenery was different from that of the capital city, as if they were always walking among a group of trees. If they came here in spring or summer, it would surely be fascinating. However, it was currently winter,

and the trees were barren, with withered branches, decaying leaves, and boring.

Nevertheless, the local architecture had its own unique characteristics, and there were also many delicious snacks. Yan Ge and Yan Jin had an enjoyable time wandering around.

“Captain Zhang?”

Yan Ge looked in the direction of the voice and saw a man of similar age to Captain Zhang, who was carrying a basket on his arm. He stood not far away, his gaze fixed on Captain Zhang, with a trace of tenderness in his eyes.

Captain Zhang quickly approached Yan Ge and said, “Young Master Qin, that person is my wife.”

Yan Ge nodded.

With his permission, Captain Zhang hurriedly walked to the man’s side and asked in a low voice, “Why are you here?”

The man whispered, “I came to the city to buy some fabric, preparing to make a cotton-padded coat for you. Who are these two?” He glanced at Yan Ge and Yan Jin curiously.

“They are young masters from the capital city,” Captain Zhang whispered.

“I see,” the man understood. “Since you have important matters, I will go back first.”

Yan Ge and Captain Zhang both seemed a little reluctant, but Yan Ge generously said, “Since we met by such a coincidence, why not walk together—if it doesn’t delay Captain Zhang’s wife from going home.”

Captain Zhang was delighted and quickly said, “Thank you, Young Master Qin. It won’t delay us. Our home is not far from Nanrun City. As long as we leave before the city gates close, it’ll be fine.”

Yan Ge signaled to Feng Run, and the two of them, along with Yan Jin, walked in front. They deliberately left Captain Zhang and his wife behind so that the couple could have a conversation.

Listening to Captain Zhang's partner softly asking about his situation in the military, if he had enough to eat and wear, and Captain Zhang inquiring about the situation at home, such as whether the crops they hurriedly harvested during the heavy rain had become become rotten… Yan Ge's enthusiasm diminished. He couldn't help but think of Huangfu Yuchen, who was far away in the capital city, and couldn't resist turning around to glance at Captain Zhan and his wife.

Although Captain Zhang and his wife weren't as intimate as him and Huangfu Yuchen, their every move and glance were filled with warmth, showing that their relationship was good.

His hand unconsciously touched the jade pendant hanging around his neck that Huangfu Yuchen had given him. He wondered if Huangfu Yuchen missed him or if he was still upset with him.

Across the street about a hundred meters away, a handsome man in a black cloak stood behind a wall. He watched the direction Yan Ge went with a faint smile on his lips and let out a slight sigh.

Deng Mande whispered, "Your Majesty, I don't understand. Since the day you learned that Yan Caiqing came to the southwest, it only took you half a day to arrange all the government affairs and then desperately chase after him. Now that you've caught up, why do you only follow him without revealing yourself?"

It turned out that the handsome man was none other than Huangfu Yuchen.

Accompanying him were Deng Mande, Gao Feng, Gao Yun, and two imperial guards.

Upon hearing Deng Mande's words, Huangfu Yuchen remained silent.

Deng Mande tentatively asked, “Your Majesty, could it be that you’re still angry with Yan Caiqing?”

“How could I be angry with him?” Huangfu Yuchen’s gaze was still fixed on Yan Ge. “Because of my identity and the unresolved matters, Xiao Ge can only be confined in the capital city. How could I not feel distressed? The reason he wanted to come here, besides exploring the veins, might be to have more space for himself. If that’s the case, I will fulfill his wish. I only need to ensure his safety.”

Deng Mande said, “I saw that Yan Caiqing bought many things in pairs along the way. It’s obvious that he has you in mind.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s eyes overflowed with a smile and indulgence. “He has a conscience.”

Yan Ge’s mood suddenly became a little down, but Captain Zhang and his wife didn’t notice. Feng Run, on the other hand, sensed it. He saw Yan Ge turn around and glance at Captain Zhang and his wife, and immediately understood that Yan Caiqing might be thinking of His Majesty. He secretly sighed at the deep affection between Yan Caiqing and His Majesty. “Young Master Qin, there’s a shop selling delicious dried fruits ahead. The Little Master might like it. Would you like to take a look?”

“Okay,” Yan Ge replied casually.

Feng Run deliberately lingered for a while, falling behind Yan Ge, and quickly signaled to Captain Zhang.

Captain Zhang raised his eyebrows in confusion, not understanding what was happening.

But his partner was quick-witted. He caught Feng Run’s gesture and upon understanding, blinked at Captain Zhang. He stopped walking, and said, “Young Master Qin, Brother Feng, it’s getting late. I should also leave and not disturb you anymore.”

Captain Zhang finally understood what was going on and scratched his head with a slightly flushed face.

Yan Ge said, “Since that’s the case, Captain Zhang’s wife must take care.”

Without the stimulation from Captain Zhang and his wife, Yan Ge’s mood improved slightly. They arrived at a dried fruit shop and bought a lot of preserved fruits. Among them, there were some dates with the pits removed. The taste was sweet but not greasy, and extremely delicious. Yan Ge secretly bought some more and put them in the system backpack.

It’s needless to say that Yan Jin, the snack lover, had the shopkeeper pack a large bag for him, which Feng Run carried on his back.

Feng Run glanced at Yan Jin’s flat stomach and couldn’t help but admire him. He wondered where all the snacks the child had eaten along the way had gone.

“It’s getting late. Let’s head back,” Yan Ge said.

“Yes.”

Yan Jin reached out to Captain Zhang. “Hug.”

Captain Zhang quickly picked him up and carefully adjusted his fur hat, making sure the wind wouldn’t blow onto his neck.

Yan Ge gently patted Yan Jin’s head. “You know how to enjoy yourself.”

Yan Jin retorted, “If you were with Father, I’m sure you would also enjoy yourself.”

Yan Ge pretended he was going to slap him.

Yan Jin: “Run, Captain Zhang!”

Yan Ge burst into laughter as Captain Zhang held Yan Jin and ran ahead.

Feng Run hurriedly called out, “Slow down! Be careful not to let the wind blow into the little master’s mouth.”

When they returned to the military camp, the sun was about to set.

Surprisingly, there was no one to greet them at the camp’s entrance. Yan Ge felt a bit puzzled, but he didn’t think too much of it. He told Feng Run, “I’ll go back to my room first. You go and see if dinner is ready.”

“Yes.”

Yan Ge and Yan Jin walked towards their quarters. Yan Jin asked, “Are you still hungry after eating so much in the city?”

“It’s not me who can’t stop eating, it’s you,” Yan Ge glanced at him.

Yan Jin giggled, “Although the capital city is bustling, you can’t find everything there. Father, the pastries we bought today called ‘You Haguo were delicious.”

“I also thought the taste was good. Tomorrow, I’ll have them buy more and let everyone taste them.”

After sitting down in their room for a while, hot water and hot tea were delivered by the soldiers. They washed their faces, cleaned their hands, and then the meal arrived.

“It’s hot pot.” Yan Jin knew the smell as soon as he detected it and quickly walked to the table. Hot pot was not only Yan Ge’s favorite but also his.

Yan Ge smiled, “It seems like everyone knows that I love hot pot.”

The soldiers who delivered the food also smiled, but their smiles seemed a bit strange.

They exchanged glances and one of them said, “Yes, it’s true. It’s just that the cooks in our camp are not very skilled. If the food doesn’t meet Yan Caiqing’s taste, please forgive us.”

Yan Ge waved his hand. “When it comes to food, of course, it’s best if it looks, smells, and tastes good. But the main thing is to fill our stomachs. You’ve all worked hard. You don’t need to serve us here. Go and have your meal.”

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After having their fill, Yan Jin lazily lay on the bed.

Yan Ge wiped his mouth and called out, “Someone, come.”

The soldier outside the door pushed it open and entered. “Yan Caiqing.”

Yan Ge said, “Tidy up this place. Also, please summon Minister Luo Wei to see me.”

The soldier replied, “Reporting to Yan Caiqing, Minister Luo Wei is currently discussing matters with the Grand General. It might…”

Yan Ge interrupted, “They must be discussing about Cuncao Valley. I want to know the progress today. Never mind, I will go and find them myself.”

The soldier hurriedly walked ahead and said, “Let this subordinate guide you.”

On winter nights, the north wind became even colder, blowing past in intermittent bursts, cutting like a knife on the face. The flickering flames in the lantern swayed gently, dimming and brightening, as if they could go out at any moment.

As they neared the General’s study, the guiding soldier loudly called out to the soldier guarding the door, “Quickly inform the General and Minister Luo Wei that Yan Caiqing has arrived.”

After a moment, General Wei Chi and Minister Luo Wei stepped out to greet him.

“Greetings, Yan Caiqing.”

“No need for formalities. Let’s go inside and talk,” Yan Ge waved his hand.

Inside the study were two charcoal braziers burning, warming the room with their red-hot charcoal and giving it a cozy atmosphere.

Once seated, Yan Ge felt that something was amiss. He looked around but was unable to pinpoint exactly what was wrong.

“ Minister Luo Wei, I came here to ask you about Cuncao Valley. Any news from Ah Fei and the others?”

Minister Luo Wei replied, “Reporting to Yan Caiqing. General Lu took over a thousand feet of rope when he went down. Currently, the end of the rope is still in the hands of the soldiers on the cliff. When we tested it by pulling, the other end of the rope remained secure, indicating that it’s still tied to General Lu. It seems General Lu will continue to venture deeper. Tomorrow morning, I will have the soldiers connect another rope to the one already there.”

Yan Ge asked again, “Can they hear us when we shout from above?”

Minister Luo Wei shook his head, “They cannot. However, when we tried pulling the rope several times, there was a response from the other end, so we believe they are still safe.”

“Very well,” Yan Ge asked about another matter, “Have the miners made any discoveries?”

Minister Luo Wei replied, “By the time we returned, they had dug about twenty feet deep and found no minerals. However, there are no plant roots in the soil either, and the miners believe that there is indeed something underground, whether it’s a mineral vein or something else, we can only find out in time.”

General Wei Chi added, “We were just discussing that. Tomorrow, we plan to send more people to dig deeper.”

Yan Ge pondered for a moment, “In that case, General Wei Chi, let’s temporarily establish a small camp in Cuncao Valley. It will allow us to provide timely support when Ah Fei and the others return. Additionally, the soldiers working in the mine can take a break and warm themselves by the fire while enjoying hot tea and soup. The expenses will be recorded under the Emperor’s account.”

Minister Luo Wei and General Wei Chi exchanged smiles.

General Wei Chi spoke loudly, “On behalf of all the soldiers, I thank Yan Caiqing. However, we dare not let the Emperor bear the expenses. These two matters are official duties and should be recorded in the military’s public accounts.”

“Alright,” Yan Ge stood up. “In any case, I appreciate both of your efforts.”

“Please rest assured, Yan Caiqing.” They bid farewell to Yan Ge.

After Yan Ge left, another person suddenly appeared in the study.

“Your Majesty.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded.

Minister Luo Wei glanced at the tightly closed door and said, “I feel that Yan Caiqing seems to have noticed something.”

General Wei Chi was taken aback, “How could it be? Since entering the study, His Majesty has only had one cup of tea, and I had already hidden the teacup before Yan Caiqing entered.”

A faint smile appeared on Huangfu Yuchen’s face, expressing a sense of pride. “Xiao Ge has sharp instincts and intelligence. He has indeed noticed that something is amiss, but he hasn’t figured out what exactly. In any case, you must keep the matter of my presence here a secret from him.”

“Understood.”

When General Wei Chi and Minister Luo Wei looked up again, Huangfu Yuchen had disappeared.

The two exchanged a glance, their eyes filled with astonishment. The Emperor’s martial arts were extraordinary, truly awe-inspiring.

Back in the room, Yan Ge found Yan Jin fast asleep on the bed.

Yan Ge didn’t fell sleepy and lightly pinched the plump face with envy and jealousy.

Yan Jin was completely oblivious, shaking his head and continuing to snore, a drool strand at the corner of his mouth.

“Sigh…” Yan Ge shook his head, covered him with the blanket, and sat down at the desk. He picked up a piece of paper pressed by a paperweight and took out a pen he carried with him.

The four soldiers guarding outside remained unmoving in the cold wind, their resolute faces unaffected no matter how much the wind ravaged them.

The door creaked open.

The four soldiers hurriedly saluted, “Yan Caiqing.”

“I’ll be here for a while so you don’t have to salute every time you see me. Inform all the soldiers that they are exempt from saluting me in the future,” Yan Ge said with a smile.

“Thank you, Yan Caiqing.”

Yan Ge handed the letter to one of them, “Immediately have this letter sent to the capital.”

“Understood!”

After freshening up, Yan Ge also lay down on the bed and fell asleep…

When he woke up in the morning and opened the door, the wind was even colder than the day before, howling and roaring, sounding like a whistle.

The soldiers had wrapped themselves in thick cloaks, while Yan Ge still wore a not-too-thick white cotton robe with a white cloak, appearing refreshing and carefree.

After breakfast, he and Minister Luo Wei went to Cuncao Valley together. The camp was already set up, with military tents that could accommodate forty to fifty people. Inside, there were two charcoal braziers and a large stove, ensuring a supply of hot tea.

“Yan Caiqing, Minister Luo Wei.” The soldier guarding the mining site greeted them with a bow as they approached.

To quickly determine if there were any mineral veins underground, the soldiers were digging in four different spots as indicated by the mining expert. The excavated soil was being transported in sturdy baskets using levers.

“How is it down there?” Yan Ge walked to one of the mining sites and looked down. It was more appropriate to call it a mine shaft. Four people were busily digging the soil, loading it into large baskets and using a lever to transport it to the surface.

One of the miners below heard his question and replied with a smile in his voice, “Reporting to Yan Caiqing, we found some reddish-colored soil. It is recorded that ‘In the mountains, there is red clay, and beneath it, there is iron.’ If there is no accident, it is highly likely that there are iron ore deposits here!”

Yan Ge and Minister Luo Wei exchanged excited glances.

Yan Ge whispered to Luo Wei, “I didn’t expect this master to have such knowledge.”

Minister Luo Wei smiled, “These miners can be considered the best experts on mineral veins in the capital. The miner who answered has worked as a

minor clerk in the Ministry of Works for over thirty years and is highly familiar with various types of mineral veins. Yan Caiqing, it's cold outside. Let's wait inside."

Yan Ge nodded and announced loudly, "Everyone, work harder! Tonight, I will treat you all to hot pot!"

The soldiers' emotions immediately surged with joy and they responded, "Yes!"

For two consecutive days, the prospecting work progressed smoothly. The soldiers discovered a small amount of iron ore in the mine, and if they continued digging deeper, they would undoubtedly find more. It was almost certain that there was an iron ore deposit here!

However, three days had passed, and Ah Fei and his team had not returned on time. The soldiers tried pulling the rope upward for about twenty to thirty feet and felt no weight or response on the other end. They didn't know if Ah Fei had discovered something and voluntarily untied the rope because it wasn't long enough, or if some other force had cut the rope. To prevent them from being unable to return the same way, the soldiers dared not continue pulling the rope. This strange situation dampened the previously cheerful atmosphere, and the entire camp was filled with gloom.

Minister Luo Wei punched his right fist into his left palm with frustration. "Before they set off, I emphasized that no matter what happens, they must return and report after three days. Even if they encounter great danger, they should be able to ensure at least one person returns to deliver the message given their martial arts skills. This is truly strange! General, Yan Caiqing, what do you think we should do now?"

General Wei Chi spoke in a somber tone, "This is truly strange! We will descend into the valley tomorrow morning , and I will personally take action!"

"No!" Minister Luo Wei hurriedly stopped him. "General Wei Chi, you are the commander of the southwestern garrison, responsible for all military

affairs in the southwest region. You have a heavy responsibility. You must not put yourself in danger."

General Wei Chi's eyes widened. "I have already lost 1,500 soldiers and horses. Now even the Imperial Guards sent by the Emperor have suffered casualties here. If I don't thoroughly investigate this matter and explain it to the Emperor, how can I justify it? How can I face the families of the soldiers?"

Minister Luo Wei said solemnly, "General, our Great Han is vast and rich in resources. The surrounding kingdoms see us as a desirable target. Nanrun City is a crucial border defense in the southwest. If Youji Kingdom launches an attack during the time you are absent, won't the Youji army easily advance given that the camp leader is away? General, please think it through!"

General Wei Chi was not an inexperienced young man after all. He quickly calmed down and nodded slowly. "Minister Wei, your words make sense. In your opinion, what should we do?"

Minister Luo Wei's expression became serious. "The Emperor sent me here to thoroughly investigate this matter, and I have no excuse to shirk my responsibility. Tomorrow morning, I will personally lead the troops to descend into the valley."

"I will go with you," Yan Ge said.

"Absolutely not!" Minister Luo Wei and General Wei Chi's faces changed simultaneously, and they spoke in unison. Even if the Emperor hadn't been present, they wouldn't dare to let him take such risks, let alone now when the Emperor was in the camp. Even if they had ten heads, chopping them off wouldn't be enough compensation if anything happened to Yan Caiqing.

General Wei Chi had a loud voice, and Minister Wei also yelled. The two voices combined were incredibly loud, catching Yan Ge off guard and his eyelids twitched.

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Yan Ge smiled and said, “General, Minister Luo Wei, there’s no need to be nervous. Let me finish speaking first. I don’t mean to boast, but in terms of martial arts, perhaps only the general can match me in this entire camp. If I go down personally, even if there is danger, I can still come back in time to report.”

“No!” Minister Luo Wei anxiously said, “Yan Caiqing, you know how much the Emperor values you. If something were to happen to you, how can I explain it to the Emperor?”

General Wei Chi also added, “Exactly. Yan Caiqing, you should stay up here.”

Yan Ge thought about how he secretly snuck down south this time, which had already made Huangfu Yuchen angry. If Huangfu Yuchen found out that he took such a risk and went into the valley, he didn’t know how furious he would be. He pinched his chin and said helplessly, “Fine. But I can’t help but worry if I don’t go down personally. If only he were here…”

Just as he finished speaking, he heard a familiar sigh in the air, and then he felt a light touch on his head.

He suddenly turned around and looked at the man standing in front of him with a smile. He blinked his eyes in disbelief, but the man was still standing in the same spot, and still looking at him with a smile.

Everyone present silently went down to their knees and bowed their heads.

“Yuchen? Is it really you?” Yan Ge looked at Huangfu Yuchen in astonishment. Even as he grabbed Huangfu Yuchen’s wrist, he still found it hard to believe. Wasn’t Huangfu Yuchen supposed to be in the capital? Why

was he here? He had thought that Huangfu Yuchen might come after him, but he didn't expect it to happen so soon.

"Who else would it be?" Huangfu Yuchen touched his face. Feeling that it was a bit cold, he held Yan Ge's face with both hands and gently rubbed it.

"I…" Yan Ge couldn't find the words for a moment. He could only stare at Huangfu Yuchen, his heart pounding. The happiness and bitter sweetness of seeing the person he missed in the next second overwhelmed him, and he didn't know how to express himself.

"Hehe…" His expression made Huangfu Yuchen happy. The longing he had accumulated while enduring the absence of his loved one was relieved at this moment, and he opened his arms to his beloved.

Yan Ge wrapped his arms around his back and couldn't help but smile too. Suddenly, everything became clear to him, and he raised his head in Huangfu Yuchen's embrace. "I remember now! You were here all along, right? I felt something was off that day in General Wei Chi's study but I couldn't put my finger on it. Now I finally understand what was wrong."

"What was wrong?" Huangfu Yuchen kissed the tip of his nose.

"It was the chair," Yan Ge said. "In terms of rank and position, when General Wei Chi and Minister Wei discuss matters, the general should be in the main seat, and Minister Wei in the side seat. But that day, as soon as I sat down, I felt that the second chair in the side seat was warm, as if someone had sat there. It meant that before I arrived in the study, there were actually three people in the room. You were sitting in the main seat, and General Wei and Minister Luo Wei were in the side seats. Am I right?"

Huangfu Yuchen nodded with a smile, "Smart."

"Of course," Yan Ge replied proudly. He leaned closer to Huangfu Yuchen's ear and asked tentatively, "I snuck away secretly, weren't you angry?"

"I was angry," Huangfu Yuchen casually said, "but I could only sulk on my own. I'm not angry anymore."

Yan Ge chuckled and stole a few glances at him. He found that Huangfu Yuchen really wasn't angry and felt relieved. He tightly held his hand, and said generously, "I missed you a lot these past few days. I even wrote you a letter and had someone deliver it to the capital." At this moment, he still didn't know that a "bad news" was waiting for him in the capital.

"It's here with me," Huangfu Yuchen recalled the contents of the letter—it was a description of their journey in detail, the interesting things and delicious food in Nanrun City, and his beloved's longing for him. A gentle smile appeared on his lips, and he kissed Yan Ge's forehead.

Yan Ge narrowed his eyes and suddenly remembered that everyone was kneeling. He quickly gestured to Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen said, "Rise."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

Huangfu Yuchen said, "This time, I came to the southwest secretly, so it must not be publicized."

"Yes."

Huangfu Yuchen then waved his hand to signal everyone to continue with their own business.

Yan Ge dragged Huangfu Yuchen into the military tent, "Since you came a long time ago, why didn't you show up?"

Huangfu Yuchen remained silent for a moment. "Because of my identity, you can only operate within the capital. I didn't want you to feel like I was trying to confine you. If I hadn't heard you say that you wanted to see me, I still wouldn't have appeared."

Yan Ge was both moved and distressed. He glared at Huangfu Yuchen with a hint of reproach. "If I hadn't mentioned that I wanted to see you until the day we return to the capital, would you still have stayed hidden?"

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. "Arrive quietly, leave quietly."

“I never felt that you were confining me,” Yan Ge said seriously.

Huangfu Yuchen smiled and hooked his lips. “It will be fine, baby. When Prince Yunxi is old enough, we can unload our burdens and go wherever we want.” He was luckier than anyone else to have such a fulfilling love. It was a happiness that could not be replaced by anyone or anything.

Yan Ge nodded with a smile, feeling more and more fortunate. Huangfu Yuchen could be domineering at times, but within his domineering nature, there was also tenderness, thoughtfulness, and indulgence. He would not let anyone take Huangfu Yuchen away from him.

The two of them stayed in the military tent for a while before appearing outside.

General Wei Chi and Minister Luo Wei had been waiting there. They approached them.

“Your Majesty, Yan Caiqing.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “General Wei Chi, prepare yourself. Tomorrow morning, Yan Caiqing and I will accompany Minister Luo Wei down.”

General Wei Chi and Minister Luo Wei were greatly shocked.

General Wei Chi said, “Your Majesty, you are of great importance and must not expose yourself to danger!”

Luo Wei also said, “Indeed. Your Majesty, someone as important as you should not risk yourself. Leave this matter to me. I will investigate it thoroughly and provide you with a satisfactory answer.”

Huangfu Yuchen said without a doubt, “No need to say more. My mind is made up.”

General Wei Chi and Luo Wei exchanged glances, their expressions showing disapproval. However, Huangfu Yuchen was resolute, and they did not dare to say more. Seeing Yan Caiqing’s indifferent expression, it was clear that he would not help persuade him.

General Wei Chi could only say, “Yes, I will make the preparations.”

“I will assist.” Luo Wei said.

After the two officials left, they both sighed in unison.

General Wei Chi frowned and said, “Minister Luo Wei, can’t you try persuading His Majesty again?”

Minister Luo Wei shook his head. “I think it’s unnecessary. Although His Majesty is young, he is not impulsive. He must have the confidence to ensure his safety before he made that decision. You and I can only focus on preparing the equipment.”

General Wei Chi said, “That’s all we can do. Minister Luo Wei, it will be up to you to assist His Majesty and Yan Caiqing when you reach the valley. I will handle all the matters above, so you can rest assured.”

“General, please rest assured as well.”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen led Bai Guan and Yunyi to the side and had someone bring grass for them. They personally fed them.

“How is Bai Guan?” Huangfu Yuchen asked. “Did it cause you any trouble along the way?”

Yan Ge patted Bai Guan’s back and smiled. “It runs fast and steady. I’m very satisfied with it. It’s also very satisfied with me. It never threw a tantrum. What about Yunyi? It didn’t really fly, did it?”

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled. “No, it didn’t. Yunyi is a wild horse caught in the mountains by the locals so it hasn’t been tamed yet. Because I was in a hurry to chase after you, I didn’t have time to tame it. I only mounted it after leaving the capital and as soon as I got on, it tried to throw me off, but with its strength, how could it resist me? No matter how much it resisted, I stayed on its back. Bai Guan has a fierce temperament, while Yunyi is proud. Throughout the journey, it never gave up resisting until two days

before arriving at Nanrun City when it finally submitted. It has finally accepted me as its master."

Yan Ge could imagine how intense and determined Yunyi's resistance had been just by listening to him. He reached out and stroked Yunyi's head. "A good horse needs a good owner to achieve its ideals and travel far and wide. Rest assured, your owner will not mistreat you."

Huangfu Yuchen laughed.

Yunyi was also intelligent. It probably saw the close relationship between Yan Ge and its master, so when Yan Ge touched it, it didn't dodge.

Huangfu Yuchen smiled with satisfaction and took out a comb from his saddlebag to groom their horses. He handed another comb to Yan Ge.

The two of them chatted and laughed while grooming their new horses. As the sun set, the yellow rays of light turned them and their horses into a warm silhouette painting.

The soldiers in the distance inadvertently saw this scene and couldn't help but smile faintly.

Deng Mande ran over, panting. "The servant pays respects to Yan Caiqing."

"Eunuch Deng is here too. No need for formalities."

Deng Mande: "I came to ask what His Majesty and Yan Caiqing would like to eat tonight?"

Huangfu Yuchen gestured for Yan Ge to decide.

Yan Ge said, "Let's have hotpot. It's convenient and warm."

"Yes, I will instruct the kitchen staff."

…..

The next day, as dawn broke, breakfast was prepared in the kitchen.

After having breakfast, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen changed into casual clothes. Minister Luo Wei ordered a hundred Imperial Guards and the group set off for Cuncao Valley. This time, everyone's preparations were more thorough. They prepared ten long ropes, tied to the top ten skilled Imperial Guards.

Following the rope that was tied to Ah fei before, they climbed down the valley.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were agile, so they were the most relaxed. The protruding rocks and soil on both sides became their footholds, and they descended over ten feet with each jump. Although Luo Wei, the Minister of War, had not been on the battlefield in recent years, his martial arts skills were still sharp, and he was quite nimble.

As they proceeded, they observed that both sides of the soil wall were bare, without any vegetation. However, they could see traces left by the previous groups on the raised mounds, proving that they had indeed descended into the valley through this route.

Yan Ge said to Liao Hui, a soldier of the Imperial Guard beside him, "Shout something upwards and see if they can hear it."

"Yes!" Liao Hui shouted loudly, "Can the people above hear us?"

"We can hear—"

The reply from above dragged on for a long time, indicating that the other party's voice should be very loud, but it sounded low to them.

Luo Wei was somewhat puzzled. "We've only descended about twenty feet. Normally, we should be able to hear their voices clearly."

Yan Ge pointed at the tooth-like protrusions on the soil wall and said, "As everyone knows, we breathe in air, and sound travels through the air. These protrusions block the propagation of sound, so it becomes weaker. If we continue to descend, the distance will increase, and there will be more protrusions. We won't be able to hear the voices from above at all, and they

won’t be able to hear our voices either. It’s not a supernatural phenomenon, so there’s no need to panic.”

“I see.” Everyone suddenly understood.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Let’s pick up the pace and go to the end of the rope first.”

“Yes.”

Fortunately, it was a sunny day. Despite the obstruction of the rock formations above, there was still light shining down, which did not affect their vision. After nearly two incense sticks’ worth of time, the group arrived at the bottom of the valley. At this point, they shouted again, but there was no response at all.

They walked forward for a dozen steps, and a cave that was about two feet tall and could accommodate a carriage appeared in front of them. Ah fei’s rope led into the cave, and its destination was unknown.

Minister Luo Wei cautiously said, “Your Majesty, Yan Caiqing, please let the Imperial Guards lead the way.”

The Imperial Guards were responsible for protecting the members of the royal family, and both Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen did not insist. They took two steps back and let four Imperial Guards walk in front.

Being at the back also had its advantages. If any issues arose, they could promptly assist the people in front.

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As they delved deeper into the cave, it became darker.

“Torches,” Minister Luo Wei said.

The soldiers immediately lit torches.

Yan Ge also took out the night pearl that Huangfu Yuchen had given him. This night pearl had a diameter of about four centimeters. It was round and translucent, not the largest among the five night pearls in the palace treasury, but it was the brightest. It was said that Empress Dowager Cixi held a night pearl in her mouth after death, and it could illuminate her hair within a hundred steps at night. Yan Ge’s night pearl was even more powerful. It made the surroundings within a hundred paces as bright as day, making the light from the torches seem like candlelight.

As Minister Luo Wei and the others walked forward, they observed the ground, searching for useful clues.

Huangfu Yuchen also looked around and frowned slightly.

“Is there a problem?” Yan Ge asked.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “This cave doesn’t show any signs of being artificially carved, but the walls are unusually smooth. It’s quite peculiar.”

Minister Luo Wei nodded. “I noticed this too, Your Majesty. If it’s naturally formed, it can truly be considered a miracle.”

Yan Ge raised his head and looked around, feeling the same way. By accident, he noticed some golden dots flickering on the wall, and approached suspiciously for a close look.

“Baby, what did you find?” Huangfu Yuchen walked over and called out Yan Ge’s term of endearment out of habit.

There was a moment of silence in the cave, and everyone turned their heads in embarrassment, avoiding Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen’s direction.

Yan Ge stared at him meaningfully.

Huangfu Yuchen casually hugged him and asked again, “Did you find something?”

“Do you see some extremely small golden dots on the walls?” Yan Ge pointed to a spot on the wall. “Here.”

Minister Luo Wei squinted his eyes but didn’t see anything.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. “Indeed.” He reached out and gently touched the wall, then brought his fingertip close to the night pearl. The golden dots were extremely tiny and difficult to notice for those with less sharp eyesight.

The golden dots were too small to determine what they were. Everyone didn’t pay much attention and continued walking forward. The cave began to twist and turn, with multiple branching paths, and they followed the rope and entered one cave after another. Strangely, all the caves were about two feet high and could accommodate a carriage. Even the curvature was almost identical to the initial cave they entered, as if they were copies.

Everyone felt a bit uneasy. Even if it was artificially carved, it wouldn’t be possible to achieve such a degree.

“Things are getting stranger,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

Yan Ge asked, “What do you mean?”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “According to General Wei Chi’s account, the first batch of one thousand soldiers and horses were forced into the valley by the people of Youji Kingdom. There is no trace of blood in this cave, indicating that Youji’s forces did not pursue them. If that’s the case, why didn’t the

soldiers wait until Youji's forces left and then return the same way? Instead, they chose to venture deeper into the cave. It doesn't make sense."

Minister Luo Wei said, "I was also thinking about that just now. If that's the case, there is only one possibility: something made the soldiers to go deeper into the cave. Either they discovered something important, or there was something that forced them further…"

A dreadful silence fell in the cave. 'Something that forced them further..'

What could it be? This assumption was too terrifying.

Everyone looked at Minister Luo Wei with complicated expressions.

Minister Luo Wei felt helpless. He was just expressing his thoughts.

Gao Feng reminded them, "The rope has reached its end."

"What?!" Minister Luo Wei was shocked. There was no sign of Ah Fei and the others, but the rope had reached its end. How were they going to find the others in this complex labyrinth of caves?

"Gao Feng, shout a few times," Huangfu Yuchen said.

Gao Feng immediately shouted, "Lu Fei, soldiers, where are you?"

A clear and loud voice echoed through several caves, and everyone held their breath, waiting for a response. In this underground maze, it seemed like only their group existed.

"Lu Fei, soldiers, where are you?"

Still, there was no response.

"Your Majesty, what should we do now?" Minister Luo Wei asked.

Huangfu Yuchen said decisively, "Bring the spare rope and connect it to Ah Fei's rope. Gao Feng, hold the rope and continue forward, and the others follow. Everyone, don't separate."

“Yes!”

Yan Ge sent out several strands of his spiritual consciousness into different caves. The strands proceeded forward but encountered several caves leading in different directions. He had no choice but to retract his spiritual consciousness.

“Your Majesty!” Gao Feng suddenly exclaimed.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen quickly walked over and looked at a rope a few steps away in surprise. There was a knot on the rope that they had connected not long ago—they had returned to the starting point.

“This…” Everyone looked at each other. Now they finally understood why Ah Fei and the others had gone missing. They must have gotten lost in this intricate cave system.

Yan Ge transmitted his voice to Huangfu Yuchen, “Should we let the Zhantian Vine search for them?”

Huangfu Yuchen answered back, “Not for now. If this issue is not handled well, it will raise suspicions.” Only a few people knew about the existence of the Zhantian Vine.

Yan Ge nodded and asked aloud, “What time is it now?”

The soldier in charge of holding the hourglass answered, “Reporting to Yan Caiqing, it has been nearly an hour since we descended into the valley.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Gao Feng, untie your rope and keep it. All the soldiers should rest where they are, let me think.”

“Yes!”

The soldiers sat down against the cave wall and took a drink of water.

Huangfu Yuchen walked to the wall and swept his sharp eyes over the surface, examining the right wall and then carefully inspecting the left.

Yan Ge followed his gaze and said, “Oh, there are also many golden dots here. It seems like they’re increasing the deeper we go.”

Huangfu Yuchen pondered for a moment and said, “Let’s follow these golden dots and see where they lead.”

Minister Luo Wei understood and immediately responded, “Yes! Someone, carefully examine all the cave walls and find the one with the most golden dots.”

“Yes!”

Once they determined which cave wall had the most golden dots, the soldiers resumed their journey.

Huangfu Yuchen took a few steps forward and noticed someone hadn’t caught up. He turned around and saw Yan Ge tilting his head, holding the night pearl between his shoulder and neck, and digging at the wall with a small iron shovel he somehow acquired.

He rubbed his forehead and walked back, saying helplessly, “Baby, there can’t be a gold mine here.”

Yan Ge turned his head and asked curiously, “How did you know I thought there might be a gold mine here?” Because of his actions, the night pearl rolled off his shoulder.

Huangfu Yuchen reached out and caught it, and couldn’t help laughing. “Otherwise, why would you be digging? What are you looking for?”

Yan Ge shrugged. “I know the possibility of a gold mine here is low, but if these golden dots aren’t gold sand, what could they be?”

Huangfu Yuchen was at a loss and held onto his hand. “Let’s follow these golden dots and see. We shouldn’t lose sight of each other.”

“Your Majesty, Yan Caiqing, please come this way,” Minister Luo Wei called from the front.

Fortunately, they brought enough rope and after another hour of walking, the cave suddenly widened.

“Look! What is that?” one of the soldiers at the front exclaimed, sounding shocked.

“That’s gold!”

“Heavens, it’s really gold!”

Yan Ge, who was at the back of the crowd, overheard their words and grabbed Huangfu Yuchen’s wrist excitedly. “There really is gold? I told you these golden dots were strange!”

Huangfu Yuchen was skeptical. First, they discovered iron ore here, and now they found gold ore. Was Heaven truly favoring them to such an extent?

Before he could speak, a shrill scream came from ahead. “Ah—”

The two looked up and saw a golden object resembling a bolt of lightning soaring through the air, sweeping horizontally and knocking down five or six soldiers in front of them.

The bodies of the six soldiers were severed in half at the waist, and the sight was really gruesome.

“Hiss—” The object stopped after the strike, then “whoosh,” it landed on the ground, its head held high. It coldly looked down at everyone, opened its mouth, and shot out a long and slender tongue like a golden arrow, repeatedly retracting and shooting it out. It was terrifying.

It turned out to be a golden python! Its entire body was glistening with golden skin, as if made of pure gold. The python was incredibly thick, just like the caves they had encountered along the way.

At this moment, everyone finally realized: no wonder the size of these caves was exactly the same, as if they were duplicates. It must be this strange python that burrowed through. What they had seen earlier was not

gold but the golden python's coiling body that resembled a mountain of gold. It was motionless, so it's no wonder the soldiers had been mistaken.

No one dared to breathe.

"W-what… what kind of creature is this?" Minister Luo Wei whispered in fear.

Gao Yun swallowed his saliva and lowered his voice. "Could it be that the people who entered before us were already…?"

Everyone's hearts sank.

"Yuchen, what is that?" Despite his profound cultivation, Yan Ge was also nervous upon seeing such a creature for the first time.

Huangfu Yuchen hugged his waist and lightly patted his shoulder with his other hand. His eyes also held a look of astonishment. "If my guess is correct, it's a Golden Python."

Yan Ge said, "I know about Golden Pythons. They're a type of snake with golden-colored skin, and it's said that the longest one can grow up to twenty feet. But they can't be this thick, and their skin shouldn't look like real gold."

Huangfu Yuchen explained, "This Golden Python is not the same as the ordinary Golden Python. I read about it in some anecdotes. The Golden Python is a type of python that feeds on gold. Its entire body, inside and out, is golden. Its flesh and skin are true gold, and because of this, people from every kingdom consider it a great threat. It is said that about a thousand years ago, several kingdoms on this continent united to exterminate all Golden Pythons. So, the Golden Python is already extinct."

Yan Ge found it hard to believe. "Is it true?"

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Huangfu Yuchen shook his head. “This is only mentioned in miscellaneous books, and there are no records in official history. I don’t know if it’s true or false.”

“Since it feeds on gold, does that mean the people who came in before might still be alive?” Yan Ge said.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “There are no plants inside this cave, not even a mosquito, apart from this strange python. Even if the people who entered a month ago weren’t eaten by the python, they have probably…But Ah Fei and the others might still be alive.”

Minister Luo Wei said, “In that case, it is highly likely that the first group of soldiers was confused by the golden python, and they came in to explore. Your Majesty, what should we do now? It seems that the python’s skin is extremely tough, and it might not be easy to deal with.”

After a brief moment of thought, Huangfu Yuchen glanced at the python and whispered, “Let’s retreat for now, eat something to replenish our energy, and then deal with it.”

“Your Majesty is considerate.” Minister Luo Wei quietly instructed, “Everyone, retreat to the previous cave. Archers, prepare for battle at the entrance.”

“Yes.”

As everyone retreated, they kept a close eye on the python, guarding against any sudden movements. The python, whether it was because it was already full or too lazy to move, did not chase after them.

The group quickly retreated to another cave and took out the dry rations they carried with them, quickly replenishing their energy.

Unexpectedly, at that moment, the ground trembled slightly, and a hissing sound echoed from above them. When they looked up, they were almost scared out of their wits.

The python was incredibly fast, and within in an instant, it had reached the entrance of the cave, arrogantly overlooking them. Suddenly, it opened its mouth, revealing sharp teeth, and its tongue flickered back and forth like lightning.

One soldier immediately fell to the ground, lifeless.

Minister Luo Wei exclaimed, “Protect His Majesty! Archers, shoot!”

These soldiers were all elites, and they quickly regained their composure after the initial shock. They rushed to the front of Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge.

“Whoosh, whoosh!” Dozens of arrows were shot, but as everyone expected, they were completely ineffective. The arrowheads bounced off the python’s tough skin and fell to the ground, leaving no marks.

Another soldier said urgently, “Your Majesty, Yan Caiqing, please go ahead. We will deal with it!”

Before the words could fully leave his mouth, the python swung its tail, and the tip of its tail swept towards him like a gust of wind.

“Gao Yun, be careful!” Gao Feng exclaimed in alarm.

Huangfu Yuchen raised his hand and struck out with a palm, directly hitting the snake’s tail. The enormous python’s body shook violently, and then it leaped in anger, swiftly swimming towards the crowd while swaying its huge head and thick tail.

The soldiers quickly dodged and were soon scattered.

“Protect His Majesty!” Minister Luo Wei shouted.

However, the python continued to thrash its body, preventing other soldiers from getting close to Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge.

Liao Hui leaped up and landed in front of Huangfu Yuchen, but before he could stabilize himself, the python suddenly twisted its body, pressing him between its hard, iron-like body and the cave wall.

Liao Hui groaned and fainted.

Huangfu Yuchen’s face darkened. He drew his spiritual sword and said without looking back, “Xiao Ge, lead the others to retreat outside the cave immediately!”

Yan Ge also drew his spiritual sword, his expression solemn. He turned to Minister Luo Wei and said, “Minister Luo Wei, lead the others to retreat outside the cave immediately!”

Huangfu Yuchen: “…”

Minister Luo Wei firmly stated, “How can I abandon Your Majesty and Yan Caiqing and leave?”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “You can’t handle it. Retreat outside the cave immediately. This is my order! Will you defy it?”

“This…” Minister Luo Wei was helpless and could only do as he was told. “Everyone, follow me and retreat!”

Gao Feng and Gao Yun didn’t move.

“You two, really…” Yan Ge waved his hand. “Forget it, you two retreat to the side first.”

The python charged towards them once again.

Huangfu Yuchen leaped forward, his spiritual sword swinging and emitting a dazzling silver light that cut across the python’s body, slicing off a piece

of flesh the size of a brick.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun exchanged astonished glances. They had also struck the python with their swords earlier, but they couldn't leave a trace. Huangfu Yuchen's sword was formidable, and they wondered about its origins.

Before the surprise on their faces could fade, they saw Yan Ge also slashing the python, leaving a diagonal sword mark.

Only then did understand that besides avoiding unnecessary casualties, Huangfu Yuchen wanted them to leave because of these two remarkable swords. The fact that Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge didn't insist on their departure showed that their trust in them had grown. They mustn't let down this trust.

Perhaps the python didn't expect that someone could harm it. It suddenly stood upright, and its massive head slammed into the cave ceiling, but it didn't seem to feel a thing. It then swiftly charged towards Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge.

Huangfu Yuchen raised the corner of his mouth disdainfully, lifting and then lowering his spiritual sword.

He aimed at the python's back, intending to split it open, but Yan Ge stopped him. "Yuchen, is there a way to capture it alive?"

Huangfu Yuchen leaped onto the python's body, his spiritual sword held horizontally above its head.

The python seemed to understand the power of this spiritual sword and immediately calmed down, not daring to move.

"Baby, don't tell me you're planning to keep it to help you find gold mines?" Huangfu Yuchen said helplessly.

"You know me well, Yuchen." Yan Ge said, "I was thinking that since it feeds on gold and has grown this big, it must have a talent for finding gold

mines. If we can tame it, we can take it to other kingdoms and mine their gold."

Gao Feng and Gao Yun became excited and looked at Huangfu Yuchen with anticipation.

Huangfu Yuchen rubbed his forehead. "Baby, it can't speak. How can we communicate with it? Besides, it's so huge. If we bring it with us, won't the whole world know?"

Yan Ge scratched his head and suddenly remembered the scaling spell they had learned. He quickly transmitted his voice to Huangfu Yuchen. "We can use the spell to shrink it."

Huangfu Yuchen nodded slightly. "That's feasible. But how do we communicate with it?"

Yan Ge thought for a moment, took out a gold ingot from his system backpack and walked up to the python. He held the gold ingot in his left hand, and the spiritual sword in his right hand. "You, help us find more of these. Otherwise, I'll cut off more of these from your body!"

He pointed the spiritual sword at the gold-colored flesh he had cut off from the python.

Huangfu Yuchen, Gao Feng, and Gao Yun were speechless.

Of course, the python couldn't understand Yan Ge's words and remained motionless.

Yan Ge looked disappointed. "Are we really going to kill it like this?"

Huangfu Yuchen had Gao Feng pick up the snake meat from the ground. He examined it carefully and was somewhat surprised. "Bany, come and take a look. Its flesh is indeed made of gold."

Yan Ge hurriedly walked over, took the snake meat, and nodded. "Indeed. The world is full of wonders."

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled. “Are you happy now? Even if it can’t help us find gold mines, just its flesh alone is quite valuable.”

The python, which had been silent all along, suddenly moved.

Huangfu Yuchen remained highly vigilant, pressing his spiritual sword closer to its head.

The python made a slight movement, turning its head to the left and then back, opening its mouth and emitting two soft hissing sounds.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen exchanged puzzled looks. Was it their imagination? It seemed that the golden python wanted them to go to the left.

“Let’s go and take a look.” Huangfu Yuchen mounted the golden python and reached out to pull Yan Ge up as well.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun hurriedly followed.

They returned to the spot where they had seen the golden python before. Yan Ge raised the Night Pearl and noticed a larger pit ahead.

The golden python swam to the edge of the pit and stopped.

At first glance, Huangfu Yuchen saw the exposed gold in the pit, roughly the size of a large table, with traces of snake teeth marks.

“It’s gold, and it seems to be quite pure without many impurities. Quite rare,” Yan Ge said. “It appears that this is indeed a gold mine. The gold has been mostly consumed by the golden python, leaving only this.”

Huangfu Yuchen gestured for Yan Ge to stay on guard against the golden python. He jumped off its back and used the spiritual sword to dig into the ground along the edge of the gold, excavating the soil to a depth of four to five feet. They could confirm that this piece of gold weighed at least two thousand catties.

Yan Ge cast a shrinking spell, reducing the golden python to the size of chopsticks, and placed it in a carved box with a sealed formation. He made a small hole in one corner of the box and threw in a gold ingot.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun were shocked, but as people who had followed Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge for a long time, their faces quickly returned to calm, as if they hadn't seen anything unusual.

Huangfu Yuchen said, "Let's find the others first before having someone carry the gold."

Yan Ge released the Zhantian Vine, and they followed it to find Ah Fei and the others.

Ah Fei and the others had been trapped in the cave and starving for nearly a day. They knew the cave was complex, and the chances of being found were slim. They had already lost hope, so when they saw Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge personally coming to find them, they thought it was an illusion. They rubbed their eyes before daring to believe and knelt down gratefully.

It took about an incense stick to locate the rest of the soldiers who had come with them but got separated.

"Have you found the previous two groups?" Huangfu Yuchen asked.

Ah Fei's face showed a painful expression. "Reporting to Your Majesty, we found them, but they are all dead. From my initial judgment, only a few of them were injured by the golden python inside the cave. The others died of starvation. It was too tragic."

A suffocating silence filled the cave.

After a while, Huangfu Yuchen said, "Where are their remains now? Can they still be found?"

Ah Fei replied, "They can be found. I left markers."

Huangfu Yuchen instructed Gao Feng and Gao Yun, "Follow the rope ahead and inform the other soldiers to come and carry the fallen soldiers' remains

back.”

“Yes.”

General Wei Chi, who had been anxiously waiting above the ground from the time they descended, breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge’s figures in his line of sight. He smiled with relief and tears streamed down his face as the bodies were brought up one by one.

“Your Majesty,” General Wei Chi knelt heavily and pleaded, “The soldiers died in such a tragic manner. I request that Your Majesty provide double compensation for them.”

“It’s only right.” Huangfu Yuchen said, “All the fallen soldiers in this battle will receive a compensation of one hundred taels of silver.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty!”

One hundred taels of silver would be enough to provide for the families of the soldiers. The soldiers knelt down with gratitude. “Thank you, Your Majesty. Long live the Emperor!”

“Rise.”

Huangfu Yuchen, Yan Ge, General Wei Chi, and Minister Luo Wei entered the tent.

After sitting down, General Wei Chi spoke with righteous indignation, “Your Majesty, the Youji Kingdom’s army first intruded into our kingdom’s territory, then plundered our people, and later forced one thousand of our soldiers into the Cuncao Valley. They have gone too far! If we don’t teach them a lesson, they will think that our Great Han Kingdom is easy to bully.”

“What do you suggest?” Huangfu Yuchen asked calmly.

General Wei Chi said, “I know that if we really fight them, it may escalate into a larger-scale war between the two kingdoms, causing both loss of life and financial burdens. Your Majesty surely doesn’t want to see such a thing happen, and I also don’t wish for it. So, my idea is to find a way to lure

them into our borders again. In that case, we will have an excuse to give them a severe lesson, avenging our fallen soldiers and intimidating them."

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Yan Ge's eyes flickered, and spoke to Huangfu Yuchen via voice transmission, "Yuchen, this plan is not bad. We not only need to teach them a lesson openly but also make them suffer in secret."

"Do you have another clever idea?" Huangfu Yuchen asked calmly, then said to General Wei Chi, "General Wei is experienced and resourceful. I trust you. As long as it doesn't cause chaos at the border, handle the other matters as you see fit. I sent Minister Luo Wei here to also assess the army. If we can showcase our military strength through this incident, it would be a double benefit."

General Wei Chi stood up respectfully and saluted, "I will comply with the orders!"

"The iron ore has been confirmed to be genuine. General Wei must ensure strict confidentiality. I will have the Ministry of Works send someone to handle the handover. After Minister Luo We finishes his task, he should return to the capital as soon as possible. Xaio Ge and I will stay in this area for a few more days and return to the capital on our own. You two don't need to worry about it."

"We will comply!"

After leaving the military tent, Huangfu Yuchen asked Yan Ge, "What's the idea this time?"

Gao Feng and Gao Yun followed a few steps behind.

Yan Ge patted his chest mysteriously, "I just obtained a treasure. Don't you want to give it a try? Let's go treasure hunting in the Youji Kingdom!"

Huangfu Yuchen became interested, “Good idea.”

Gao Feng and Gao Yun exchanged excited glances. They knew there would be something fun to do if they followed Yan Ge.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “I’m not familiar with the border towns near the Youji Kingdom. We should find a guide. Gao Yun.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Go and ask General Wei if he has anyone familiar with the border towns of the Youji Kingdom,” Huangfu Yuchen ordered.

“Yes, I’ll go.”

Gao Yun went to ask General Wei, and he introduced them to Zhang Di, who was familiar with the border towns of the Youji Kingdom and the situation of the border garrison in Lushan Town.

The next day after breakfast, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, accompanied by Yan Jin, Gao Feng, and Gao Yun, set off for Lushan Town.

The territory of Youji Kingdom was only one-fifth the size of Great Han Kingdom, with a small population. Agriculture was the mainstay of the feudal economy, but with fewer people and less land, the resources they obtained were limited. That’s why the Youji Kingdom was keen on plundering from Great Han Kingdom. They would seize whatever they could. They didn’t dare to confront Great Han directly and could only resort to such petty methods.

A month ago, the order to infiltrate the Great Han Kingdom’s territory and plunder several villages was issued by General Qin Ke, the stationed border commander of the Youji Kingdom. He was also the one who came up with the idea.

The plundered resources had allowed him to live a lavish life for a while, and enjoying hot pot in winter was a kind of luxury. This hot pot was

something only enjoyed by those in Great Han, which made General Qin Ke unable to resist plundering them.

“General, it’s time to go on patrol,” Deputy General Shi said after finishing the hot pot, wiping his mouth and standing up.

General Qin Ke patted his belly and stood up as well, saying, “I’ll go too.”

“Please, General.”

The two of them slowly arrived in the town.

Although Lushan Town was only a medium-sized town, it had frequent trade with the Great Han Kingdom because it was a border town. Many merchants from the Great Han would transport goods that the Youji Kingdom lacked and sell them here. Although they paid more taxes than the Youji Kingdom’s merchants, they also made a good profit. The street was full of small stalls, and pedestrians were bustling.

“Spicy hot pot! Delicious and cheap. Have a bowl in winter, and feel so warm!”

After wandering around for a while, General Qin Ke got hungry again and walked briskly to a small stall selling spicy hot pot. He said lazily, “Give me two bowls. Make it with two skewers of each meat and two of everything else.”

The stall owner squeezed out a smile and said, “Alright, General, please wait a moment.”

After the two bowls of spicy hot pot were ready, General Qin Ke and Deputy General Shi each had one.

General Qin Ke began to eat heartily, and after finishing, he wiped his mouth and casually left behind four or five copper coins.

“General, this isn’t enough…” the stall owner gathered courage to say.

General Qin Ke acted as if he didn’t hear and walked away without a care.

The stall owner looked at Deputy General Shi and said, “Deputy General Shi…”

Deputy General Shi glared at him and said, “Go, go! Can’t this General cheat you? I’ll make it up to you tomorrow.”

The stall owner dared not speak up again.

Yan Ge and the others entered the town and happened to witness this scene. Their faces changed.

“Outrageous!” Gao Yun angrily exclaimed, “Are our kingdom’s merchants treated this way in Youji Kingdom?!”

Gao Feng was equally furious, “Young Master, Boss, let’s go and talk to them.”

“I’ll go!” Yan Jin volunteered, slipping out from Gao Feng’s embrace and heading down.

Seeing that Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had no intention of stopping him, Gao Feng let him go.

Yan Jin ran a few steps to catch up with General Qin Ke, stretched out his arms to block him, and looked at him with teary eyes, “General, although my father can make some money selling spicy hot pot, it’s barely enough to support my brother’s education, save dowry for my two sisters, and provide milk for my younger brother. It’s simply not enough to support our whole family. Please pity us and give us our money.”

A cute child suddenly appeared in front of General Qin Wei and he smiled. But as soon as he heard his words, his face turned black.

Passersby saw a small child barely reaching the knees of the tall and mighty general blocking him and curiously gathered around.

“General, please pity us and give us our money back. We are from the Great Han Kingdom, but we never bully the people of the Youji Kingdom. You won’t bully us either, right? Wuuu…”

“It’s the General again. How can he bully a child? What’s going on?” The onlookers whispered to each other.

General Qin Ke’s face turned black then red, and he yelled at Deputy General Shi, “Didn’t I tell you to pay? Why didn’t you pay?”

The condemning gazes of the crowd all fell on Deputy General Shi.

Deputy General Shi was unjustly accused but couldn’t voice his grievances. He quickly took out a few silver coins from his pocket and handed them to Yan Jin, saying, “Take it, keep it. This General was in a hurry and forgot.”

General Qin Ke and Deputy General Shi walked away in embarrassment, quickly distancing themselves.

Yan Jin walked happily to the stunned stall owner and handed him the money without waiting for him to speak, saying directly, “No need to thank me. We are all from the Great Han Kingdom, helping each other is only natural.”

The people around laughed.

On seeing Yan Jin walk to Yan Ge’s side, the stall owner guessed that they were together, and quickly approached and thanked him profusely.

“Are you all from Nanrun City? Let me treat you to a bowl of spicy hot pot as a token of gratitude.”

Huangfu Yuchen, Yan Jin, Gao Feng, and Gao Yun all looked at Yan Ge.

Yan Ge smiled and said, “Thank you, then. We’re all hungry anyway. May I ask for the boss’s name…?”

“My surname is Zhong,” the stall owner said while skillfully adding vegetables to the broth. “You don’t need to be formal. I’m just a small vendor here.”

Gao Feng asked, “Was that General Qin? Does he often act like this?”

Boss Zhong let out a deep sigh and said in a low voice, “This General Qin loves the food of Great Han Kingdom but not its people. Almost every time he passes by my stall, he orders a bowl of spicy hot pot and intentionally pays less. He doesn’t eat vegetarian dishes, only meat dishes, and he orders every kind of meat. And each kind of meat is two coins. But this purple rabbit meat is only available in the Great Han Kingdom and is even more expensive, costing three coins per skewer. He eats around thirty or forty coins’ worth of hot pot each time but only gives four or five coins. I also have to ‘treat’ him to a large bowl. How can I afford it? But he is a general, what can we do?”

“Is it only you who encounters this situation, or do many merchants from the Great Han Kingdom face this?” Huangfu Yuchen asked.

Boss Zhong said, “Many people encounter this situation. It’s common for those soldiers patrolling to take a cake or a few fruits from our stalls.”

Yan Ge said, “Since this kind of thing happens frequently, why don’t you report it to the county magistrate in Nanrun City or to General Wei Chi?”

Boss Zhong smiled and replied, “The county magistrate and General Wei Chi are high-ranking officials and are busy with important matters. Do they have time to deal with such small issues?”

Huangfu Yuchen said coldly , “It’s their duty to handle these matters. How can they dare not to take care of it?”

Boss Zhong was taken aback upon hearing his strong tone. This person seemed like he didn’t consider the county magistrate and General Wei Chi important at all. He often did business on the street and encountered many people, so he had a bold guess: Could this person be an even higher-ranking official than the general?

Gao Yun patted Boss Zhong’s shoulder with a smile and said, “Don’t worry, just listen to our boss.”

After finishing the spicy hot pot and walking away, Yan Ge smiled and said, “Zirui, I have another idea.”

“If you thought of something, just say it. You can’t keep it to yourself after all,” Huangfu Yuchen teased.

Yan Ge beckoned with his finger and said, “Come closer…”

Just as he was about to tell his idea to Huangfu Yuchen, Yan Jin tugged at his sleeve.

He looked over in confusion.

General Qin Ke and Deputy General Shi were walking towards them. When General Qin Ke saw Yan Jin, his gaze followed to Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen beside him. He immediately understood that he had been tricked.

He walked over with a threatening posture, intending to settle the score. “You all, stop.”

“What instructions do you have, General?” Yan Ge asked.

General Qin Ke snorted, “Are you people from the Great Han Kingdom? Where are your travel permits?”

Gao Feng handed over the travel permits that General Wei Chi had prepared for them.

General Qin Ke glanced disdainfully at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, and said, “As a father, is it interesting for you to let your son call others ‘father’ without caring.”

Yan Ge smiled faintly, “It’s true that I should care, but it’s even more important to address unfairness. General, you are a respected figure, yet you covet a few dozen coins from a small stall owner. Aren’t you afraid of being laughed at?”

Deputy General Shi raised his chin and rolled his eyes, his attitude extremely arrogant: “Presumptuous! Watch your words when speaking to our general!”

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Huangfu Yuchen glanced at him coldly, raised the corner of his mouth, and calmly said, “It is well known that the Youji Kingdom lacks various resources. Many supplies need to be purchased from the Great Han Kingdom. Even the fragrant rice that the Youji Emperor loves to eat has to be bought from the Great Han Kingdom. Aren’t the two generals afraid that this news will reach General Wei Chi’s ears, and he will block the border trade in anger? I wonder who will be in a hurry at that time.”

General Qin Ke remained unchanged.

“You—” Deputy General Shi became furious and was about to speak, but was stopped by General Qin Ke.

Huangfu Yuchen said lightly, “Let’s go.”

The group swaggered away.

General Qin Ke’s face turned dark, and he muttered in a low voice, “These people probably have some background. Send a few people to follow them.”

“Yes!”

Gao Feng whispered, “Boss, Young Master, someone is following us.”

“Let them be.” Yan Ge held onto Huangfu Yuchen’s arm and walked to a roadside stall, admiring the various accessories unique to the Youji Kingdom.

They walked and wandered around, with the followers trailing behind. When they stopped, the other party also stopped. When they continued, the

other party also continued.

After they had strolled around enough, Yan Ge signaled to Huangfu Yuchen and the others. They merged into the crowd, easily shaking off their pursuers.

“Xiao Ge, now you can tell us your plan,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

Yan Ge thought of his brilliant plan and chuckled, “Gao Feng, Gao Yun, take this twenty-two taels of gold to a goldsmith. Ask the owner to coat a sheet of iron about the size of a table with gold. Then go back to the Ruyi Inn we passed by earlier.”

“Yes.”

Gao Feng and Gao Yun left with the gold.

When it was dark, the five of them arrived in the outskirts.

Yan Ge said, “Let’s release the Gold Python first and see if we can find any gold mines nearby.”

Gao Yun said, “Young Master, gold is precious precisely because it is scarce. It may not be easy to find one.”

Yan Ge smiled, “You underestimate the Gold Python. Its ability to grow this big is enough to prove its talent for finding gold mines. If there’s a gold mine nearby, it will definitely find it.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “We’ll know once we try.”

Gao Feng was a bit worried, “What if it escapes after being released?”

Yan Ge patted Huangfu Yuchen’s back and said, “With Yuchen here as the gatekeeper, even ten thousand men can’t open the gate.”

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled, “Mmm, but it’s ‘husband.’”

Yan Ge was speechless.

Having had enough of the idle talk, he took out the silk box containing the Gold Python. A golden light flashed, and the shrunken Gold Python landed on the ground, twisting gently. He then used the resizing technique, restoring the Gold Python to its original form.

Yan Jin had only heard Yan Ge describe what the Gold Python looked like, but on seeing it with his own eyes, he couldn't help but exclaim, "Wow, it's so shiny!"

The Gold Python seemed to have truly become tame. Knowing that Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were not easy to mess with, it didn't attack them. It didn't even spare them a glance, lowering its head and burrowing into the ground.

"Gao Feng, Gao Yun, you stay here."

Yan Ge had only managed to say a few words before being embraced by Huangfu Yuchen. They closely followed behind the Gold Python and went underground.

Yan Jin was held by Huangfu Yuchen's other arm.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun understood that it would be difficult to keep up with Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, so they obediently stayed in place and found a hidden spot.

The Gold Python moved through the underground like a fish in water. It went forward for about five to six miles before starting to burrow deeper underground. Yan Ge estimated that it would need to go nearly a thousand meters deep before its speed slowed down.

Suddenly, the Gold Python rolled in all directions, squeezing the surrounding soil with its immense strength and making the surrounding space wider. When it was large enough for it to turn around inside, it stopped.

Yan Ge raised the Night Pearl and saw a wall of gold shimmering in front of him. He smiled without surprise, "Haha… Ah!"

In an instant, he saw the Gold Python open its mouth and swallow a large chunk of goldstone, and he exclaimed in distress. Ignoring him, the Gold Python opened its mouth again, taking in another big bite.

Huangfu Yuchen lifted his hand, and the pitiful Gold Python shrank again, and returned to the silk box.

Yan Ge clung to Huangfu Yuchen's shoulder and patted the silk box, comforting it, "If you want a horse to run, you have to feed it more grass. Don't worry, I'll let you eat, but not now."

Yan Jin looked around and sighed, "This is a huge gold mine, but it's at least two to three feet underground. No wonder nobody has discovered it until now. Papa, what do we do next?"

"Next, we proceed with the second part of the plan," Yan Ge said with a smirk.

Early in the morning, Lushan Town became lively as soon as the city gate opened.

General Qin Ke wore a frustrated expression as he walked with his subordinates on the main street. He was certain that the people from the Great Han Kingdom he encountered yesterday were suspicious, but his subordinates lost track of them. After returning to the military camp, he grew more and more annoyed the more he thought about it. He had slept poorly all night, waking up before dawn for training and then followed for patrol duties.

Suddenly, he saw a familiar figure in white in the crowd not far away, looking around nervously. Wasn't that the smiling young man from yesterday?

"You all continue with the patrol!"

"Yes!"

After a quick scan and ensuring that the others who were with Yan Ge weren’t nearby, General Qin Ke swiftly chased him. He observed as the person purchased a sturdy small hoe from an iron shop, filled a water pouch at a tea shop, bought twenty steamed buns from a bun shop, and finally acquired two torches from a grocery store.

General Qin Ke was full of suspicion. He was afraid of alerting the person, so he lightened his footsteps and quietly followed behind Yan Ge until they reached the outskirts. He watched as the person in white looked around again and suddenly moved a pile of dead branches, rotten grass, and fallen leaves, revealing a dark cave.

General Qin Ke widened his eyes in astonishment. This place was naturally filled with thorns, and it was infested with snakes and insects among the dense vegetation. Even ordinary people wouldn’t come here to gather firewood or collect medicinal herbs. He never expected that there would be such a large cave hidden here.

The fanatic and excited expression on the person’s face made him extremely suspicious. What could be hidden in this cave that would make this Great Han person so excited? He watched as the person took out something from their pocket, brought it close to the torch for examination, and even grinned from ear to ear.

When General Qin Ke saw what the person held in their hand, he turned pale. It was a piece of golden stone. Could it be gold! Could there be a gold mine hidden here?

The cave sloped downward and continued for quite some distance. After walking for a while, they finally reached the end.

The person in white stuck the torch into the ground, rushed towards a golden wall, and laughed excitedly. He then picked up the small hoe and began digging fervently.

General Qin Ke had some skills as a stationed border general. Even at this moment, he managed to restrain his excitement and calmly watched the person dig relentlessly for nearly half an hour until he finally grew tired. He

rubbed his numb hands, sat down in a corner, drank a few sips of water, ate some steamed buns, and held up a piece of golden stone in admiration. After a while, he actually fell asleep!

This was a great opportunity! General Qin Ke listened carefully to the person's breathing and confirmed that they were fast asleep. He quietly picked up the hoe, walked to a slightly distant spot, and started digging on the wall. His luck was good. After just two attempts, he dug out a fist-sized golden stone. After carefully examining it, he couldn't contain his excitement.

He put the golden stone into his pocket, returned the hoe to its original place, and swiftly used lightness skills to quickly leave.

Yan Ge opened his eyes and grinned cunningly.

General Qin Ke returned to the city and saw a commoner leading a horse about to leave the city. He walked a few steps forward and said, "I am General Qin Ke. I'm borrowing the horse and will return it soon! Go—"

Before the horse's owner could react, his horse had already galloped away.

"Go—Move aside—"

The people on the street panicked and retreated to both sides of the road, bewildered by what was happening. They wondered what major event had occurred that the general was riding a fast horse on a busy street.

Deputy General Shi happened to be in the camp and when he saw General Qin Ke return in a hurry, he knew that something big had happened. He quickly approached.

"General!"

"Deputy General Shi, immediately gather one thousand soldiers and bring shovels, iron balls, and spades!"

"General, what's going on?"

“Hurry!” General Qin Ke shouted sternly.

Deputy General Shi didn’t dare to ask further. “Understood!”

After assembling the soldiers, General Qin Ke had a slightly triumphant expression as he said to Deputy General Shi, “This morning, I followed the white-clad person from yesterday and discovered a gold mine.”

“What?!” Deputy General Shi was skeptical and cupped his hand, “General, please forgive me for speaking frankly. Our mountains and rivers have been thoroughly explored by kings of various dynasties over the past few hundred years. There have been no new veins or mines discovered. Furthermore, that person in white is from the Great Han Kingdom. How would they know where the gold mine is in our kingdom? General, could it be that you’ve been deceived?”

General Qin Ke took out a cloth bag from his pocket and handed it to him. “I randomly dug this out in the cave. How could it be fake?”

Deputy General Shi opened the cloth bag and was greatly astonished. “It’s real!”

General Qin Ke ordered, “Leave the city immediately! Follow me!”

A thousand soldiers galloped towards the outskirts, quickly arriving at the hidden cave entrance.

“Ignite the torches, and everyone follow!”

On entering the cave, Deputy General Shi followed closely beside General Qin Ke, carefully examining the cave walls. “The scale of this cave is so large. It’s excessive if it was made just to deceive us. Is it really real?”

General Qin Ke said, “I won’t waste words. You’ll know when we arrive. There’s only one person inside the cave, and based on initial judgment, he doesn’t seem to know martial arts. But everyone should still be cautious.”

“Yes.”

The group hurriedly advanced and soon reached the bottom. They didn't see the person in white, but General Qin Ke didn't think too much of it, assuming that he had temporarily left or had gone back to fetch tools to collect the gold stones.

He pointed to the golden wall on the opposite side and smiled triumphantly. "Do you see it, Deputy General Shi?"

Deputy General Shi was filled with joy, he quickly walked over and ordered, "Dig!"

A soldier used a shovel to dig, and with a "clang", a large piece of golden stone fell to the ground.

"General, look at this piece. It's this big. If we report this to the Emperor, it will be a great achievement!" Deputy General Shi happily walked over, picked up the stone, but suddenly stopped. "Huh, this…"

Deputy General Shi held the stone, slowly stood up and looked at General Qin Ke with a complex expression. He opened his mouth but couldn't say a word.

"What's the matter?" General Qin Ke asked impatiently as he stepped forward.

Deputy General Shi swallowed nervously and replied, "This…. It's just ordinary stone covered with a layer of gold!"

"What!" General Qin Ke turned pale with shock.

In a similar cave three miles away, Yan Ge imagined General Qin Ke's expression and happily leaned into Huangfu Yuchen's embrace.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun also laughed until tears streamed down their faces.

"Boss, Young Master, I really wish I could see the expression on that general's face. It must be priceless."

Yan Ge couldn’t stop laughing, “Now he knows that people of our Great Han aren’t easy to mess with!”

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The cave General Qin Ke went to was actually another cave where Yan Ge had the Golden Python drill out. The gold pieces that he and General Qin Ke initially dug out were real, but they were buried in the soil beforehand. But the large piece of gold stone the soldiers later dug out was just an ordinary stone with one side covered in gold. So when Deputy General Shi picked up the stone, he discovered the truth.

Gao Yun said, “Boss, I have a question. The army of the Youji Kingdom has caused us to suffer more than a thousand casualties. Why don’t we just let the Golden Python destroy the cave and wipe out their thousand soldiers as payback?”

Gao Feng gave him a helpless look and said, “Use your brain. For General Qin Ke’s people to plunder our people within our borders is like slapping General Wei Chi in the face. This revenge opportunity should naturally be given to General Wei Chi to vent his anger. Besides, we still have matters to deal with here. If their general were to die at this moment, their emperor would definitely send people to investigate, wouldn’t we be inviting trouble?”

“Oh, right,” Gao Feng finally understood.

The group continued using their tools to excavate the gold stones. Yan Jin was also not idle. Although he didn’t help with mining, he occasionally handed them water or moved the small pieces of gold they dug out and placed them together. After moving them, he sat on a nearby blanket and enjoyed his snacks.

Yan Ge swung his spiritual sword to dig out a piece of gold, then sighed pretentiously, “I never thought that this young master would one day

become a miner. Alas, how tragic.”

Gao Feng and Gao Yun thought to themselves, ‘From the way you and His Majesty easily mine gold as if cutting vegetables, you are probably the most relaxed miners in the world.’

Huangfu Yuchen kissed Yan Ge’s forehead, “My poor baby. This gold mine is within the territory of the Youji Kingdom, so it’s not convenient for our people to come here. Besides, I plan to keep this gold as secret reserve funds, not to be deposited in the national treasury. It may come in handy at a critical moment.”

“I don’t mind, but Gao Feng and Gao Yun have indeed worked hard. You should reward them,” Yan Ge said with a smile.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun both knelt down and said, “We dare not! Serving the boss and young master is our duty and our pleasure!”

“Such honest kids,” Yan Ge praised.

Huangfu Yuchen, Gao Feng, and Gao Yun all had helpless expressions.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Xiao Ge is right. I will promote both of you to Deputy Guard Captains of the fourth rank.”

Gao Feng and Gao Yun happily looked at each other and said, “Thank you, Your Majesty!”

“Father, I also helped,” Yan Jin ran over to join in the fun.

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at him and said, “I will appoint you as first rank —”

Yan Jin’s eyes lit up. “First rank of what?”

“Of eating. What do you think?” Huangfu Yuchen finished speaking.

Yan Jin pouted.

Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, Gao Feng, and Gao Yun all laughed.

With their profound cultivation, it took the group three days to dig out nearly three million taels of gold. Although many of the gold stones had impurities, even after refining, they would still have around 2.5 million taels, which was equivalent to 25 million taels of silver. It was a considerable wealth.

Huangfu Yuchen gave Yan Ge a gold stone that resembled a galloping horse and weighed about a thousand taels. He also gave Gao Feng and Gao Yun each a piece weighing around a hundred taels. Yan Jin also received a gold lump the size of an egg and he happily put it into his small pouch.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen used some spatial techniques to collect all the gold, which was actually stored in the system backpack. However, the space was highly confidential, and Yan Ge currently had no plans to let a fourth person know about it.

There were still some scattered small gold stones in the gold mine, but because Huangfu Yuchen couldn’t stay away from the palace for too long, they didn’t have time to dig them out. Yan Ge released the Golden Python and let it eat them, then the group left the cave, allowing the Golden Python to collapse it. Perhaps there was more gold inside, but it shouldn’t fall into the hands of the Youji Kingdom.

After disguising themselves, the group successfully left Lushan Town and returned to Nanrun City. They greeted General Wei Chi, Minister Luo Wei, and Deng Mande, and set off back to the capital with Deng Mande.

Standing at the entrance of Tenglong Palace, Yan Ge looked at Huangfu Yuchen by his side, and the corners of his lips curled up. It felt as if they had never been apart.

The guards of Tenglong Palace saw them return and they knelt down and saluted. “Greetings, Your Majesty. Greetings, Yan Shiqing.”

“Disp—,” before Yan Ge could say “disperse,” he suddenly felt something was wrong. Yan Shiqing? Did the guards make a mistake, or did he mishear

it?

“Ding. Side mission—Return to the rank of Caiqing.
Mission time: six months. Mission success reward: 50,000 taels of silver, one storage ring. Mission failure penalty: deduction of 50,000 taels of silver. Accept the mission? ‘Yes’ or ‘No’.”

Yan Ge instinctively accepted the mission. First, he was informed of his demotion, and then he learned that completing the mission would allow him to obtain the legendary storage ring. He didn’t know if he should be frustrated or delighted. Like a tiger pouncing on its prey, he pounced on Huangfu Yuchen’s back, wrapped his arms around his neck, and demanded an explanation, “You demoted me to Shiqing?”

“Yes,” Huangfu Yuchen reached his hand behind him to support Yan Ge, calmly carrying him as they continued walking towards the palace.

The palace attendants lowered their heads respectfully.

Yan Ge gritted his teeth and said, “Didn’t you say you wouldn’t get angry with me?”

Huangfu Yuchen didn’t say a word and walked into the palace, placing Yan Ge on the bed and sitting beside him. “Baby, if you had told me properly that you wanted to go to the southwest, I might not have refused. I’m upset that you sneaked away without informing me. Do you know why I didn’t want you to leave the capital alone?”

He explained to Yan Ge the conclusion he had drawn earlier about Centipede, “When I found out that you had sneakes out of the capital, I was scared to death, fearing that Meng Xiaohun would come after you and harm you in a place unknown to me. So, this is my way of punishing you. Let’s see if you dare to be disobedient in the future.” He knew that Yan Ge cared a lot about his rank, so he used this method to teach him a lesson, so that his audacity wouldn’t grow.

Yan Ge wanted to cry but had no tears, yet he couldn’t say to Huangfu Yuchen: ‘Promoting my rank is my system mission, and it also relates to

our cultivation. If you must punish me, at least find another method.'

"I left you a note, it's not considered sneaking." He tried to defend himself desperately.

"What note?" Huangfu Yuchen asked in confusion.

Yan Ge was taken aback. "Didn't you see it? I pasted it on the top of the bed canopy."

"On top of the bed canopy?" Huangfu Yuchen looked at him with a half-smile.

Yan Ge coughed lightly and turned his head.

Deng Mande whispered, "Yan Shiqing, please forgive this servant for being nosy. After you left, His Majesty didn't rest on the bed at all. He was handling government affairs until almost dawn and only slept on the desk for a while. After arranging everything, he left the palace to chase after you."

Yan Ge suddenly turned his head back. He didn't say a word, but secretly reached out to hold Huangfu Yuchen's hand, looking at him with apologetic eyes.

Huangfu Yuchen shook his head gently and leaned in to give him a kiss on the lips.

Yan Ge still felt a bit unwilling. "Centipede didn't make a move, so maybe __"

"No." Huangfu Yuchen rejected him outright. "However, it is indeed strange that the Centipede didn't appear this time. Did it not receive news of our departure from the capital, or is there another plot?"

"Don't change the subject—" Yan Ge emphasized each word.

Huangfu Yuchen patted his head, took off his outer robe, and prepared for a bath.

Yan Ge started looking for his pouch.

Huangfu Yuchen knew his intentions without looking and said leisurely, “Even if you bring out 200,000 taels, it’s useless.”

Yan Ge froze, then deflated and fell onto the bed.

Huangfu Yuchen walked up to him and half-dragged, half-carried him to the side of the bath, helping him remove his cloak. “Alright, baby, don’t be angry. As long as you behave, I will find a chance to restore your position.”

Yan Ge glanced at him with a sour expression but didn’t say anything. In his heart, he thought, ‘Once I get the storage ring, I won’t give it to you!’

Days passed with the two of them playfully teasing each other. By the time their cultivation reached the end of the Divine Transformation stage, it was already midwinter, with snow falling every two or three days.

The weather was too cold, and all construction work in the capital came to a halt. In addition, the common people began preparing for the Lunar New Year. Even in winter, the capital remained lively and people from nearby villages and towns flocked to the city to buy New Year’s goods. Various fragrances filled the streets, attracting not only children but also adults. After a year of hard work, it was time to reward themselves.

On the twenty-third day of the twelfth lunar month, the First Company began their holiday and would resume work after the fifteenth day of the first lunar month.

The managers and sales assistants of other stores watched the employees of the First Company as they took their families to the streets to buy New Year’s goods, watch performances, and listen to storytellers. They couldn’t help but feel envious and secretly sighed. Why wasn’t their boss as considerate and reasonable as Yan Shiqing?

Lu Shaoling was also one of the objects of their envy. After being polished by Yan Ge for several months, he had already transformed and become an

assistant manager of the First Company. He walked confidently through the streets with his head held high.

“Oh, isn’t this Uncle Zhao? How have you been lately? I’ve been so busy that I didn’t have time to come and visit you. I heard that your leg has been bothering you again recently. I’ll have someone go to the Ping’an Pharmacy to get you some medicine. It’s guaranteed to work. I’m an employee of the company, so you’ll get a 20% discount on the medicine.”

“Oh, Uncle Li is here too? It’s so cold today, why aren’t you wearing a cloak? If you don’t mind, I can lend you mine. You can return it to me whenever you have the chance. If it fits you well, you can keep it.”

After Lu Shaoling left, Master Zhao and Master Li looked at each other, unable to express their feelings. This young master Lu seems to have changed completely. No wonder Duke Lu always has a smile on his face wherever he goes. Lu Shaoling used to be a useless dandy, but now he was a talented young man. As for their own sons, they used to be useless dandies, and they still were.

Maybe they should talk to Yan Caiqing and send their sons to the First Company for some training too? This thought floated through both men’s minds.

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Later, Yan Ge sent Master Li and Master Zhao's sons to the military camp for training, and they actually made a name for themselves.

On the 26th day of the twelfth lunar month, the palace held the seal ceremony, during which the emperor stopped working and the ministers also took a break.

On the 27th day of the twelfth lunar month, Huangfu Yuchen had already planned to visit the Yan family with Yan Ge. Officially, Yan Xiaojing was his subject, but personally, he was his father-in-law. Huangfu Yuchen presented a precious jade-carved pine tree, finely crafted and of great value both in terms of Huangfu Yuchen's intentions and the craftsmanship, as well as the value of the jade carving. As soon as Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge left, Yan Xiaojing locked it in a secret room for fear of losing it.

On New Year's Eve, Yan Ge woke up and discovered that it had snowed the previous night. Everything was covered in a silvery white coat, as if spring had come overnight and thousands of pear trees were blooming.

Huangfu Yuchen led all the members of the royal family in offering sacrifices to the heavens and ancestors before having breakfast.

The New Year's Eve dinner was the most important meal. The royal family usually had a table full of delicacies, and the New Year's Eve dinner was even more sumptuous, with a variety of delicacies, fruits, and desserts. Even if they only took a bite of each, it would be enough to make them full.

Despite this, the New Year's Eve dinner was exhausting because the etiquette was even more cumbersome. Blessings, toasts, serving meals,

kneeling, expressing gratitude, and more, not a single detail could be neglected.

This was Yan Ge's second New Year's celebration in the palace, so he already had some experience. He had the Imperial Kitchen send some of his favorite dishes to the Tenglong Palace and only after he and Huangfu Yuchen had eaten to about 80% full did they attend the formal New Year's Eve dinner.

The first day of the lunar new year was as important as New Year's Eve. Before dawn, civil and military officials arrived at the meeting hall to pay their respects and congratulate the emperor. The hall was solemn and majestic, with various instruments playing, creating a lively and festive atmosphere.

After Huangfu Yuchen ascended the throne, the civil and military officials took their respective positions, kowtowed three times and knelt nine times, shouting, "Long live Your Majesty!" The sound echoed through the sky, displaying the majesty of the emperor. Next, the Historians read the New Year's greetings and summarized the achievements of the emperor and ministers in the previous year, praising their merits. After the reading, the officials kowtowed again, and Huangfu Yuchen rewarded them with tea and seats. After drinking the tea, the officials' New Year's greetings were considered complete.

After the officials left, Huangfu Yuchen rewarded the eunuchs and palace maids with prepared red envelopes. The envelopes contained golden ruyi, jade ruyi, silver ruyi, and silver coins. Depending on their ranks, the eunuchs and palace maids received different rewards.

At the same time, the harem was also bustling with activity. The palace maids and eunuchs from each palace and hall came to pay their New Year's respects to their masters, and the princes paid their respects to the empress. The consorts also paid their respects to the empress.

Yan Ge had just finished dressing when the palace maids and eunuchs in the hall knelt in front of him with smiles on their faces, offering their New

Year’s greetings. He had prepared red envelopes in advance and gave generous rewards to each of them.

After the New Year, the weather gradually became warmer.

Yan Ge arrived at a heavily guarded entrance with Du Juan, Gao Feng, and Gao Yun. A sign that read “Agricultural Experimentation Department” hung above the gate, guarded by the imperial guards who prevented unauthorized entry. This was a newly established department before the New Year, dedicated to researching agricultural development. It was managed by the Ministry of Revenue, and Yan Ge was the chief advisor.

“Greetings, Yan Caiqing.”

“No need for formalities.” Yan Ge entered the gate. He had been demoted to a lower rank not long ago, but on New Year’s Day, Huangfu Yuchen promoted him back to Caiqing as a New Year’s gift.

Nevertheless, the common people already understood that regardless of Yan Ge’s rank, the emperor’s favor towards him would not diminish in the slightest. Even if his rank fluctuated, everyone regarded it as a matter of interest between the emperor and Yan Ge. If anyone dared to disrespect him because of his lowered rank, they would face unlucky consequences. About a month ago, someone learned that Yan Ge had been demoted to a lower rank and thought that the emperor no longer favored him, so they had the audacity to speak rudely to him. As a result, the emperor had them thrown in the dungeon.

Once inside the gate, they passed through the first and second courtyards and saw fields of green wheat and vegetable gardens. A group of workers dressed uniformly were busy in the fields, loosening the soil, weeding, and fertilizing…

Chen Guowei, the Minister of Revenue, happened to be inspecting the fields with several officials. When he saw Yan Ge, he quickly walked over and saluted, “We have seen Yan Caiqing.”

“No need for formalities.” Yan Ge asked, “Master Chen, how is the situation in the experimental field?”

They walked as they talked.

Chen Guowei said with a smile on his face, “According to your instructions, we selected fully-grained wheat seeds for this batch. We also invited experienced farmers to assist us and applied straw fertilizer, wood ash, and manure in the fields. Now the wheat in the experimental field is growing exceptionally well, surpassing the yield of ordinary farmers in previous years by two or three times. Yan Caiqing’s talent is truly admirable!”

“Yes, indeed.” The other officials echoed.

“Let’s see for ourselves before making conclusions.” Yan Ge stepped into the irrigation channels in the wheat fields and carefully examined the moisture in the deep ditches and canals. He said to Chen Guowei, who was following him, “The spring season in the capital has more rainfall. We must clean the irrigation channels in a timely manner and enhance their drainage capacity to prevent water damage to the wheat.”

“Yes,” Chen Guowei said to the clerk, “Write it down quickly.”

“How are the vegetables growing?” Yan Ge looked towards the nearby vegetable garden, where many workers were bending over to weed and combat pests.

Chen Guowei said, “We followed your instructions before the New Year and built greenhouses. Now the cucumbers, peppers, and eggplants are growing exceptionally well, but there are quite a few pests that need to be dealt with every day.”

Yan Ge tried to recall what he had seen on a TV program in his previous life and said, “Mix soap powder, manure liquid, and water in a ratio of 1:4:400, then spray it on the leaves of the vegetables. It should be effective.”

Chen Guowei didn’t understand, “What does the ratio 1:4:400 mean?”

Without Yan Ge having to intervene, Gao Feng answered, “It means mixing one ladle of soap powder, four ladles of manure liquid, and 400 ladles of water, then stirring it evenly.”

“I see.” Chen Guowei nodded.

The clerk hastily wrote down the instructions.

Yan Ge said, “Since this is an experimental field, everything is under trial. You can start by spraying the mixed liquid on a few plants to see if it is effective. If the results are not obvious, you can adjust the ratio of soap powder and manure liquid accordingly to find the most suitable proportion. This is the work of all the staff in the experimental department, I believe I don’t need to explain further.”

Chen Guowei solemnly clasped his hands, “I understand, please rest assured, Yan Caiqing.”

Yan Ge looked at the officials and said, “If you achieve success, I will report your contributions to the emperor and reward you accordingly. But if anyone disapproves or slacks off, be careful of losing your official positions.”

“Yes!”

“I also have some other information here. Take it as a reference, but make sure to keep it confidential.” Yan Ge instructed Du Juan to hand the information to Chen Guowei.

“This official understands.”

After leaving the experimental field, Yan Ge pondered over things, and his steps became slower and slower.

Gao Feng asked, “Young Master, do you have something on your mind?”

Yan Ge said, “Our kingdom’s food production is too low. As far as I know, except for the fish and rice regions the side of Lu River, the yield of other areas is around 200 catties per mu, which is too low.”

Gao Feng said, “Actually, our kingdom is much better off compared to other kingdoms. The Mai Kingdom has vast grasslands and hardly produces wheat and rice; the Youji country is mostly mountains and forests, and its grain crops cannot compare to our kingdom’s.”

Yan Ge couldn’t help but smile, “But should we compare ourselves to kingdoms that are worse off? If we want our Great Han to become a strong nation, increasing food production is a necessary prerequisite.”

Gao Yun was confident, “The progress in your experimental field is going smoothly. I believe that in another two years, our kingdom’s food production will definitely increase.”

Yan Ge remained silent. He was not a farmer in his previous life after all, nor did he graduate from an agricultural college, so he had limited knowledge of farming. He could only do his best.

Some time ago, he suddenly remembered a magical stone that could increase food production—the Maifan stone. This stone is also known as the Longevity Stone and Health Stone, it is a natural mineral and medicinal rock that is non-toxic, harmless to living organisms, and has certain biological activity. One of its functions is soil improvement. As far as he knew, the Maifan stone was not only used for feeding livestock and planting vegetables in his previous life, but also for making various daily necessities such as Maifan stone water dispensers, tea sets, bathtubs etc, which are beneficial to human health. The Yan family in his previous life had many Maifan stone products, and there were magazines dedicated to introducing Maifan stone. Maifan stone was believed to be formed by volcanic eruptions from underground, subjected to high temperatures and acidic substances generated by volcanic activity, and pressure from crustal movement. In other words, the Maifan stone was found in volcanic areas.

He had checked In the palace library and learned that the volcanic belt of Great Han was mainly located in the northeast, northwest, southwest, and

coastal areas of the south. He believed that the possibility of the Maifan stone being present in these areas was high.

Yan Ge looked at Gao Feng and Gao Yun, “Gao Feng, Gao Yun, as far as I know, you two are not married yet, right?”

Both of them smiled.

“Yes, Young Master.”

Yan Ge smiled and asked, “Now you two are quite popular in the capital. I heard that the matchmakers have almost worn out your door. Are you still not satisfied with the girls introduced?”

Gao Feng said, “Marriage is a lifelong matter. We don’t want to rush into it.”

Gao Yun also said, “Yes. We have just turned twenty, so we don’t want to get married too early.”

Yan Ge said, “If I have an important mission that requires both of you to leave the capital for more than half a year or even longer, would you be willing?”

Gao Yun eagerly responded, “Of course, we’re willing.”

Gao Feng also nodded, “May I ask, Young Master, what is the mission?”

“This mission is not dangerous, but it will require a longer time,” Yan Ge said, “but there’s no rush. Let’s return to the palace together for now. I’ll need Yuchen’s help for this matter. Just the two of you won’t be enough.”

Gao Yun was eagerly looking forward to the new mission. “Young Master, shall we return to the palace now?”

Upon returning to the palace, Yan Ge led Gao Feng and Gao Yun directly to the Imperial Study. Huangfu Yuchen usually handled state affairs in the Imperial Study in the morning.

Seeing the door to the study closed, Yan Ge estimated that Huangfu Yuchen was in a meeting with the ministers, so he took Gao Feng and Gao Yun to a side hall to wait.

“Reporting to Yan Caiqing, the Emperor has finished the meeting.”

The group entered the Imperial Study. Huangfu Yuchen had just stood up from behind the desk, and Deng Mande was tidying up the papers on the desk.

“Xiao Ge, you’re back.”

Yan Ge nodded and instructed the palace attendants, “You may all leave.”

“Yes!”

Only Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, Gao Feng, Gao Yun, and Deng Mande remained in the Imperial Study.

“Your Majesty, I pay my respects.” Gao Feng and Gao Yun showed their respect.

Huangfu Yuchen waved his hand and walked over to Yan Ge, pulling him to sit down. “Baby, what’s the matter?”

Yan Ge said, “Yuchen, do you know about the Maifan stone?”

“Maifan stone? I’ve never heard of it.” Huangfu Yuchen arched his hand in a respectful manner. “Please enlighten me, my love.”

Yan Ge brushed off his hand and continued, “The Maifan stone is…”

As they listened to his explanation, Huangfu Yuchen and Gao Yun both wore surprised expressions.

“Such a miraculous stone exists in this world?” Huangfu Yuchen’s expression became serious. “If we can find this stone, wouldn’t our kingdom’s food production double or even increase exponentially?”

“That’s correct.” Yan Ge played with the golden fan in his hand. “So, I want to send Gao Feng and Gao Yun to search for this stone. But their numbers alone won’t be sufficient; we will need additional manpower.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. “No problem. According to what you said, we will dispatch teams to the northeast, northwest, southwest, and coastal areas. Lu Fei and Jun Xiang are also reliable. Gao Feng, Gao Yun, and the two of them will each lead a team of ten people. How does that sound?”

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Yan Ge nodded, “Okay, too many people will only attract attention anyway. Let’s handle it that way.”

Huangfu Yuchen immediately gave the order, “Summon Lu Fei and Jun Xiang.”

Ah Fei and Jun Xiang were on duty in the palace, and they arrived quickly. They kneeled down and saluted respectfully, saying loudly, “Greetings, Your Majesty! Greetings, Yan Caiqing!”

“Rise.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty!”

Yan Ge said, “These soldiers are different; even their salutes are so imposing. That’s how soldiers should be.”

“Thank you for your praise, Yan Caiqing,” Ah Fei and Jun Xiang responded in unison.

“Yuchen, what do you think about me going to the military camp for a few days of training in the near future?” Yan Ge suddenly had the idea.

Huangfu Yuchen had no objections. “Okay, when I have time, I’ll accompany you.”

He then turned to Deng Mande and said, “Deng Mande, brief Lu Fei and Jun Xiang on the matter.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. General Lu, General Jun, it’s like this…”

Upon hearing about the Maifan stone, Ah Fei and Jun Xiang were equally delighted. “It’s an honor for us to serve Your Majesty and Yan Caiqing in this matter.”

Yan Ge spoke seriously, “I believe that besides us, no one else knows about the existence of the Maifan stone. Therefore, you must ensure utmost secrecy during this mission.”

Gao Feng said, “Please rest assured, Yan Caiqing. If someone asks, we will simply say that we are collecting these stones for ornamental purposes.”

Yan Ge nodded. “Once you arrive at the designated location, inquire about past volcanic eruptions in the area from the locals. Then search within that region to narrow down the search area.”

“Yes!”

Jun Xiang asked, “How can we identify the Maifan stone?”

Yan Ge took out a Maifan stone he had bought from the system’s store and handed it to Huangfu Yuchen. After examining it, Huangfu Yuchen passed it to Gao Feng and the others to take a look.

Yan Ge explained, “This is the Maifan stone. It has several characteristics. First, it is porous, and if you look closely, you can see numerous tiny holes. Second, its surface is rough and uneven, resembling grains of rice. And third, Eunuch Deng, bring a white porcelain bowl and fill it halfway with water.”

“Yes!”

After the water was brought, Yan Ge squeezed two drops of ink into the bowl with a pen and stirred it with his finger. The water immediately became cloudy.

Yan Ge placed the Maifan stone in the water and said, “Wait patiently.”

After about an incense stick, everyone was surprised to find that the water in the bowl had become clearer than before.

Yan Ge then explained, “This third characteristic is that Maifan stone has purification and adsorption properties. If you can’t determine whether a stone is Maifan stone based on its appearance, you can use this method to test it. If the water becomes completely clear after one or two hours, that means it is the Maifan stone.”

Gao Feng, Gao Yun, Ah Fei, and Jun Xiang listened attentively and remembered the instructions.

“Have you all remembered?” Yan Ge asked.

Gao Feng and the others responded, “We have remembered.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “You should go back and hand over the work, then depart as soon as possible.”

“Yes!”

After Gao Feng and the others left, it was Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen’s private time. Deng Mande brought tea and snacks and waited outside the door.

“I noticed your serious expression earlier. Is something the matter?” Yan Ge asked.

“I received intelligence that there have been some unusual activities in the palaces of other kingdoms recently. The New Dynasty grand celebration is approaching, so several monarchs from different kingdoms will come to personally congratulate me. I believe we will receive diplomatic letters soon,” Huangfu Yuchen said, holding a simple gray gemstone ring in his hand. With a flip of his hand, a red apple appeared. He peeled it with a fruit knife and handed to Yan Ge. This was the storage ring that Yan Ge received from the system, he had sworn not to give to Huangfu Yuchen, but he ended up giving it anyway.

The storage ring was quite advanced, equipped with insurance functions. The apple inside had been stored during the New Year but it still retained its juiciness.

His system space had not upgraded to activate the freshness function yet.

He took a bite of the crisp and sweet apple and smiled casually, “The congratulations is false, but the curiosity is real, right?”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, “It’s good for them to come in person, it will be an opportunity to showcase the might of our Great Han Kingdom.”

“It seems like you’ve already thought about how to receive them,” Yan Ge said, taking a bite of the apple and running his hand through Huangfu Yuchen’s hair. He had absolute confidence in Huangfu Yuchen’s ability to govern the kingdom and was not worried at all.

“I was just from discussing this matter with the ministers,” Huangfu Yuchen smiled proudly. “It’s a rare occasion for them to come here in person, so I will make sure they don’t leave disappointed.”

“On the tenth day of the third month…” Yan Ge pondered, “It seems that my sister-in-law is due to give birth around that time. Yesterday, my mother sent someone to the company to relay a message, asking me to come back as soon as possible to check on my sister-in-law’s condition. It’s funny because I just examined her pulse a few days ago.”

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled, “This will be the first grandchild for my father-in-law and mother-in-law, so it’s no wonder they’re so concerned.”

Yan Ge nodded and looked at the sky. “I think I should pass by today while I have the time.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Gao Feng and Gao Yun have left, so you’ll be short of assistants by your side. I will assign Lin Zhang and Jiang Ting to accompany you. They are both smart individuals.”

“Okay.”

Lin Zhang and Jiang Ting came forward, and Yan Ge left the Imperial Study with them.

It was a warm spring day, and the sunlight felt pleasant on their bodies. As they passed through the Imperial Garden, Yan Ge couldn’t help but slow his pace and casually admire the vibrant flowers. His mood was as radiant as the sunshine.

Lin Zhang and Jiang Ting were also infected by his mood and felt quite good.

Consort Rou, Consort Zhao, Consort Zheng, and Consort Li were playing with Consort Rou’s three-year-old Princess Huifu, also known as Princess Huiya, in the garden. When they saw Yan Ge, they all stood up.

As Caiqing, Yan Ge had equal rank with the five of them and they greeted each other.

Yan Ge took out a colorful bracelet from his pocket and handed it to Princess Huiya, saying to Consort Rou, “This is made of unique colored stones from Nanrun City. It’s not worth much, but it’s interesting, and the little princess might like it.”

Because Princess Huiya was a girl, Yan Ge didn’t have to be as deferential to her as he would have been if she were a prince.

“Thank you for your thoughtfulness, Yan Caiqing,” Consort Rou thanked him with a smile.

Princess Huiya had been well-educated by Consort Rou, she thanked Yan Ge in her sweet and childish voice, which was very cute.

Yan Ge said, “I still have some matters to attend to, so I’ll take my leave.”

Just as he took a few steps, Consort Zhao suddenly spoke, “Wait.”

Lin Zhang and Jiang Ting immediately became vigilant, their eyes filled with caution as they focused on Consort Zhao.

Consort Zhao gave them a cold glance, and their gazes became sharp, their momentum imposing.

Consort Rou, Consort Li, and Consort Zheng's expressions changed slightly, anxiously watching Consort Zhao, afraid that she might say something inappropriate and anger Yan Ge.

Yan Ge remained indifferent. "May I ask what instructions Consort Zhao has?"

Concubine Zhao threw off her cloak, gave him a glance, and said expressionlessly, "We have nothing to do all day. You find a way to keep us entertained."

Yan Ge: "…."

Consort Zhao raised her eyelids with a touch of nobility and charm. "This is what you should do." In the past, the four would compete for favor, scheme against each other, and vie for attention. But now, Huangfu Yuchen treated them as if they didn't exist. What was there left for them to fight over? Unconsciously, they had become friends, and now they often helped Consort Rou, whom they used to be jealous of, to take care of her daughter. However, Consort Rou only had one child, while there were four of them, and the attention was insufficiently divided.

Yan Ge was momentarily speechless. However, he didn't sense any malice from Consort Zhao.

Consort Li and Consort Zheng exchanged a glance and also said, "To be honest, Consort Zhao's words reflect our thoughts as well. Yan Caiqing, you always have many ideas. I wonder if you could…"

Consort Rou stepped forward with the little princess in her arms and knelt before Yan Ge, saying, "We are grateful for your assistance, Yan Caiqing . If you can truly help us find something to do, the four of us will have some purpose."

Yan Ge understood the implied meaning in her words. If he could really give Consort Zhao and the others something to do, their thoughts about Huangfu Yuchen would fade more quickly. It would be beneficial for him, Huangfu Yuchen, and them.

He pondered for a moment. “I can’t think of any good ideas at the moment. However, there will likely be many monarchs from other kingdoms coming to offer congratulations during this year’s New Dynasty Day celebration. It will be necessary to entertain them with performances such as songs. If you are willing, I can inform His Majesty and the Minister of Rites and delegate this task to the Empress and the four of you. What do you think?”

Consort Zhao and the others showed some joy on their faces. On one hand, they would have something to occupy their time, and on the other hand, this year’s grand celebration was a major event. If they were in charge of arranging the entertainment, they could showcase their abilities. If they succeeded, it would bring honor to their families.

Consort Li said, “The four of us are willing, but will His Majesty really trust us, a few women, with such a big task?”

Yan Ge smiled dismissively and asked, “Do you have confidence in carrying it out?”

“Of course!” Consort Zhao said, “No matter what, we were all famous talents before entering the palace.”

Yan Ge nodded. “In that case, I will discuss it with His Majesty.”

Consort Zhao said, “Thank you in advance, Yan Caiqing . However, after the celebration, I hope you can find something more long-lasting for us to do.”

Yan Ge smiled faintly. “Consort Zhao, do you know that even the servants who do menial tasks in my company have a probationary period? I don’t expect them to have great abilities, but at the very least, they need to be responsible or clever enough. I hoped to use the grand celebration to understand each of your strengths. If you can successfully handle this matter, we can discuss other things later.”

These words expressed Yan Ge’s principles while still being polite. Consort Zhao, Consort Li, and Consort Zheng all nodded without objections. It was

their first direct contact and understanding of Yan Ge, and they couldn’t help but appreciate his way of handling things.

“Well, I will go back and mention it to His Majesty,” Yan Ge said.

Consort Zhao and the others were pleased. “Thank you, Yan Caiqing.”

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Yan Ge left and returned, leaving Huangfu Yuchen puzzled. He walked up and held Yan Ge's shoulder with concern, "What happened, baby?"

Yan Ge explained the matter with the consorts in the imperial garden and Huangfu Yuchen frowned, "I gave them a chance to choose in the beginning, but it was their decision not to leave the palace. Now they're bored in the harem, so what right do they have to blame you? Did you promise them?"

Yan Ge said, "I wouldn't have bothered if I saw that they had not really let go of their ambitions."

Huangfu Yuchen said coldly, "In that case, I'll come up with another way to send them out of the palace."

Yan Ge shook his head. "Do you think I don't know about it just because you don't mention it? Consort Zhao, Consort Li, and Consort Zheng's fathers are all prominent ministers in the court, and their grandfathers used to hold official positions and had many students. If we forcefully send them out of the palace, it will undoubtedly anger these ministers and create disharmony in the court. Forget it, even if they have other intentions, they are still under our control. If we can find something for them to do that will completely settle them down, it will be a permanent solution. As I said before, as long as they don't provoke us, I won't treat them badly. If they have ulterior motives, there's no need for us to be polite to them. If they are clever enough, they will know what to do."

Huangfu Yuchen pondered for a moment and agreed, "Fine, let's do it as you said. Go talk to the Minister of Rites, and I'll have Deng Mande go to the Empress."

“Alright.”

“It’s going to be hard work, my love,” Huangfu Yuchen held his chin and kissed his lips. “Tell me if there’s anything I can help with.”

“I know,” Yan Ge picked up Huangfu Yuchen’s teacup and finished the tea. “I’m going back to Yan Mansion. I won’t make it in time for lunch if I’m late. My mother’s braised lion’s head is exquisite.”

Huangfu Yuchen laughed. “Go ahead. Bring me some when you come back.”

“No problem.”

Yan Ge waved his hand without looking back.

Once it was confirmed that Yan Ge had left, Huangfu Yuchen said expressionlessly, “Deng Mande, summon the four consorts.”

“Yes!”

Consort Zhao, Consort Li, Consort Zheng, and Consort Rou had not left the imperial garden. Upon hearing that Huangfu Yuchen had summoned them, they felt anxious.

Consort Li whispered, “Bring the little princess with us.”

Guided by eunuchs, the four of them arrived at the study, feeling even more anxious. This was the first time Huangfu Yuchen summoned them to the study, and the implication was self-evident.

The four kneelt at the door, awaiting the summons. The palace maids gently carried the innocent little princess and stood by the side. They waited for a quarter of an hour before hearing a cold and indifferent “Enter” from inside.

“Consort Rou, Consort Zhao, Consort Li, and Consort Zheng, enter and greet His Majesty!”

The four consorts entered the study, not daring to lift their heads and knelt respectfully. “Concubines greet Your Majesty!”

“Father Emperor.” The innocent little princess saw Huangfu Yuchen and smiled, calling out to him as she extended her arms.

Huangfu Yuchen picked her up and held her in his arms, sweeping his gaze over the four consorts meaningfully. Finally, he rested his eyes on Consort Li.

Consort Li broke out in a cold sweat.

“I am aware of the matter with you seeking Yan Caiqing’s help, and I have already agreed,” Huangfu Yuchen’s tone was calm. He didn’t sound angry, but the four consorts knew that this kind of Huangfu Yuchen was even more terrifying. They all lowered their heads, “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Now, Great Han Kingdom is undergoing reforms everywhere, and it is a time for talents. Many new officials have been promoted in the court, and they have made great contributions to the Kingdom. If you can ensure the successful completion of the grand celebration, it will be a contribution as well.”

Consort Zhao, Consort Li, and Consort Zheng were all taken aback. The underlying meaning of his words was clear—if they made any mistakes, they could be dismissed with a word from the emperor even with their fathers’ positions in court. They once again deeply understood the power of the throne.

Consort Zhao hurriedly said, “We genuinely want to contribute to the Kingdom. Yan Caiqing possesses extraordinary talent and ingenious strategies. That’s why we troubled him. We apologize, Your Majesty.”

Huangfu Yuchen rubbed the little princess’s head and said in a soft voice, “Remember, I gave you all a chance, and I won’t give you a second chance. You may rise.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Yan Mansion.

When Madam Yan heard that Yan Ge had returned, she almost ran to the front door to greet him.

Yan Ge embraced her with surprise, “Mother, you came to pick me up? It’s been a long time since I received this kind of treatment.”

Madam Yan playfully scolded him, “Stop being so sticky. I want you to go and see your sister in law quickly. She’s about to give birth, and I’ve been worried.”

Yan Ge fanned himself and looked up at the sky, “I knew it, once your grandson is born, I’ll definitely fall out of favor. Sigh…”

The nearby maids and servants couldn’t help but laugh.

“Alright, stop being silly.” Madam Yan was also amused by Yan Ge.

Lady Wen was in her room, lying on the bed with her eyes closed.

When Yan Ge and Madam Yan entered, she heard their footsteps and bowed slightly through the curtain, “Second Brother has arrived, please forgive my rudeness.”

“There is no need for such courtesy, sister in law.” Yan Ge took her pulse and smiled, “Sister in law and my little nephew are both doing well, don’t worry.”

“That’s good, that’s good.” Madam Yan urged, “Let’s go out. Don’t disturb your sister in law’s rest.”

During lunch, Yan Xiaojing also returned.

At the dining table, Yan Ge informed Yan Xiaojing about the arrangements for the performances to entertain the foreign monarchs during the grand celebration and Yan Xiaojing glared at him after hearing it.

Although Yan Xiaojing could understood Yan Ge's plan after thinking about it, he couldn't help but worry, "The Empress and the four consorts have never dealt with such matters before. If they mess up, it will be a joke for the foreign monarchs."

Yan Ge said, "I've considered that. Therefore, the Ministry of Rites will still arrange the program as usual. The Empress and the others will perform first during the Grand celebration, and if they mess up, Father can arrange for someone to save the situation. If the people you arranged end up not having to perform, just have Yuchen provide each of them with a subsidy."

"You…" What else could Yan Xiaojing say. He was already used to his son taking every opportunity to extort the emperor. Let him be, children and grandchildren have their own blessings.

In the blink of an eye, it was already March. On the first day of March, Lady Wen gave birth to the eldest grandson of the Yan family. Yan Xiaojing named him Yan Xiangtian. During the full moon celebration, the Yan Mansion followed its usual customs. Officials gave red envelopes according to their ranks- the officials were well aware of Yan Mansion's rules, so no one dared to give more than they were supposed to.

Yan Ge truly lived up to his reputation as the wealthiest merchant. His full moon gift was even very generous, and on Yan Xiangtian's full moon day, he gave each student in the kingdom a fountain pen and notebook for free on behalf of the Yan Mansion. Regardless of their age, all students could go to shops with certificates issued by their school teachers to receive them.

As the day of the grand celebration approached, the whole kingdom gradually entered a festive atmosphere. Whether it was the capital city, provincial capitals, county towns, villages, or towns, they were all filled with joy and decorated with colorful lanterns. The entire nation celebrated together.

The annual opening day was already a festival, not to mention the grand celebration that happened every five years. On the day of the grand celebration, people across the Kingdom set off firecrackers, and everyone

knelt and worshipped towards the imperial city to express their gratitude for the emperor's grace.

Starting from March 5th, the monarchs of the Mai Kingdom, Wei Kingdom, Mini Kingdom, Youji Kingdom, and Liao Kingdom arrived in the capital one after another, as if it had been prearranged.

The monarchs of the Mai, Liao, and Youji Kingdoms, Hou Mailong, Liao Chengyuan, and Luo Yousong, were the first to arrive and arrived together.

When the carriages of the three monarchs entered the city boundary of the capital and traveled on the cement road leading to the south gate, the three monarchs couldn't conceal their shock. They were amazed at the broad and smooth grayish-white road that could accommodate three carriages side by side. The sound of horse hooves on the road was crisp and clear. Along the sides of the road, thick poplar trees were planted every three feet, their lush green leaves providing a pleasant sight and casting a grey shade on the road, which felt refreshing when a gust of wind blew.

Even the guards and palace attendants in the procession couldn't help but be amazed. Their eyes secretly glanced at the ground, and some even discreetly used their feet to feel the hardness of the ground.

"So, this is the long-awaited cement road… It's truly miraculous," murmured Luo Yousong. "If all the roads in the Great Han Kingdom are built like this, land transportation in all directions would undoubtedly be more developed. From the farthest north to the farthest south, it would probably save a quarter of the travel time."

Liao Chengyuan nodded in agreement, "I'm really looking forward to meeting that Yan Caiqing."

However, Hou Mailong's face was gloomy, and he remained silent.

The procession continued its leisurely journey for more than half an hour until they finally arrived at the south gate. In front of the gate was a spacious and flat square, covering several acres, also paved with cement,

and surrounded by trees. The square was bustling with pedestrians coming and going.

The city gate was tall and majestic, with sharp corners, exuding a solemn and dignified atmosphere. On both sides of the gate, the city guards stood tall, dressed in armor, holding long spears and appearing like sculptures. The city walls were also made of cement, giving the impression of being as hard as iron and stone. Soldiers patrolled the walls with disciplined steps, emanating a powerful military presence.

The carriages pulled by spirited horses smoothly entered the city gate. The festive sound of drums and gongs filled the air as the people of the Great Han Kingdom lined the streets to welcome the arrival of the foreign monarchs, applauding and cheering with enthusiasm.

However, Hou Mailong, Liao Chengyuan, and Luo Yousong were not in the mood to feel the joyous atmosphere. Their eyes scanned the wide roads, symmetrical green trees and flower beds along the sides of the road, and the novel architecture within the city, and their heavy hearts sank even further. Unbeknownst to them, the capital had become an unparalleled city!

“Ride—” A cavalry holding red silk banners rushed forward. Leading the way was a black steed with a resolute and dignified general atop it. The cavalry rode at such a fast pace, yet the pedestrians on the road showed no signs of panic, even continuing with their own tasks. It was evident that this cavalry was well-trained and posed no danger to the people on the road.

The general halted his horse a dozen steps away, dismounted cleanly, went down on one knee, and clasped his fists with a resounding voice. “On behalf of His Majesty, the Commander of the Imperial Guards, Yang Zhuo, welcomes the esteemed monarchs! After your long journey, please allow this humble servant to escort you to the residence for accommodation.”

Hou Mailong said, “Thank you for your efforts, General Yang.”

“Please!”

After the three monarchs were settled in their accommodations, they came and sat in the grand hall. Various fresh fruits, tea, and snacks were continuously brought from the palace. Square-shaped peaches, beverages of different flavors, biscuits of various colors, soft and sweet cakes etc. Everything amazed them, but they maintained a calm demeanor.

When their shock subsided, Zhang Yongfu entered the room with a dusting cloth in hand and knelt down. “Zhang Yongfu, Deputy Manager of Internal Affairs, pays respects to the three esteemed monarchs.”

“Deputy Manager Zhang, rise,” Hou Mailong’s Mai Kingdom was the most powerful among the three, so he spoke first.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Zhang Yongfu said. “Lunchtime is approaching, and I came to inquire about the preferences of the three esteemed monarchs so that the arrangements can be made promptly. Here is the menu, please have a look.”

Hou Mailong, Liao Chengyuan, and Luo Yousong looked at the so-called menu. When they saw that it listed hundreds of dishes, they exchanged a glance without showing any reaction.

Hou Mailong said, “I would like to have…”

He ordered more than twenty dishes, and Liao Chengyuan and Luo Yousong each ordered more than twenty as well. Whether intentional or not, none of the dishes they ordered overlapped.

Zhang Yongfu’s expression remained unchanged. After taking note of their orders, he bowed again, “Please rest well, esteemed monarchs. I will have everything prepared.”

“Very well, you may leave.”

“Thank you, Your Majesties.”

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Hou Mailong, Liao Chengyuan, and Luo Yousong returned to their respective rooms to rest for a while, and the palace attendants soon came to report.

“Your Majesties, please proceed to the dining hall for your meal.”

The three of them met at the entrance of the dining hall, each with a question in their minds: How could the Great Han Kingdom prepare so many dishes without repetition? And how would they arrange so many dishes appropriately when three monarchs dined together?

Upon entering the dining hall, they were taken aback by the dining table in the center. They had never seen such a table before— it was a large round table with four layers of rotating tabletops, increasing in size from top to bottom. The bottom layer was fixed and held the utensils, while the three upper layers could be rotated. Each layer was neatly arranged with various dishes and with a quick glance, they confirmed that they were indeed the dishes they had ordered.

Zhang Yongfu approached and said, “Please be seated, Your Majesties. This table can rotate, and if you feel that our service is not attentive enough, you can rotate the tabletops yourselves to select the dishes you prefer.”

This round table made Liao Chengyuan and Luo Yousong feel comfortable. Although the power of the Mai Kingdom was slightly stronger than theirs, as fellow monarchs, none of them wanted to be subordinate to another. The Eight Immortals table had a distinction between upper and lower seats, but this round table allowed the three monarchs to sit on an equal footing.

“This table is quite interesting,” Luo Yousong chuckled. “Your Majesties, please be seated. After more than a month of traveling, we can finally have a good meal today.”

“Please.”

“Please.”

After lunch, they sat for a while, but thinking about the recent series of changes in the Great Han Kingdom, they couldn’t sit still and decided to go out for a walk.

The Ministry of Rites arranged for Official Zheng and Zhu, officials of the Main Office of Historical Records, to accompany them.

The group soon arrived at the bustling streets. They had already experienced various specialty foods during lunch, so there was no need to elaborate. They marveled at the unique attire worn by the people of the Great Han Kingdom, the advertise boards, the pulleys used to transport heavy goods on the roadside, the parasols held by graceful women, the footballs kicked around by children… The intoxicating aroma of the Drunken Immortal Inn, the fragrance of wine emanating from the winery, the lively amusement park, the scholarly atmosphere of the Chongwen Hall, the bustling entertainment city, the cheering football stadium, the uniform architectural style of the pedestrian street, the four or five-story residential areas… everything astonished the three monarchs. They even glanced at the public toilets that were cleaned spotlessly and had flowers planted nearby to reduce odors.

Of course, the most commendable aspect was the streets of the capital. Every street in the capital was now paved with concrete-they were all spacious, smooth, and clean. Even if there was nothing to be happy about, their moods improved while walking on the streets.

Official Zheng said, “There are still three days until the New Dynasty Day. If Your Majesties don’t mind, I can arrange the itinerary for these three days. What do you think?”

“Very well,” Liao Chengyuan said. “We are interested in visiting the Chongwen Hall, the entertainment city, the amusement park, and more.”

“His Majesty has already instructed us to treat the three esteemed monarchs well. We will do our best to ensure that Your Majesties have a delightful time,” Official Zheng replied.

Hou Mailong said, “By the way, ’Nanyi’ Company has gained widespread fame, and even I who is far away in the Mai Kingdom have heard of it. I wonder if the three of us have the honor of visiting it?”

Official Zheng maintained his composure and smiled, “While ‘Nanyi’ Company is well-known, it is actually just an ordinary quadrangle courtyard. Tonight, Your Majesties can rest well and relax. Tomorrow morning, I will first take you to the Chongwen Hall and then to the entertainment city. How does that sound to Your Majesties?”

He evaded the subject of the First Company, and not wanting to push it, Hou Mailong and the others nodded in agreement.

After a long and tiring journey, they strolled for a while before returning to their accommodations.

Qingsong Courtyard

Hou Mailong sat silently in his chair, his face gloomy. Grand Tutor He Buyan was also speechless.

After a while, Hou Mailong slammed the table and said in a deep voice, “I heard that most of the significant changes in the Great Han Kingdom are related to Yan Caiqing. It’s a pity that such a person was not born in my Mai Kingdom or married into my Mai Kingdom!”

After Hu Mailong had ventes his anger, He Buyan spoke, “Your Majesty, His Majesty Liao and His Majesty Luo brought beautiful princesses with them on this trip. They said it is for sightseeing, but I’m afraid they have ulterior motives.”

Hou Mailong sneered, “We have used the beauty trap before, but it was ineffective. It shows that it is only a mediocre strategy.”

Aomei Courtyard

Liao Chengyuan looked at his beautiful and graceful sixth daughter, Liao Xueyin, and said, “My child, you have seen the city of the capital, haven’t you?”

“Yes, Father,” Liao Xueyin replied, her voice as melodious as a warbler, which was particularly pleasant to the ear.

Liao Chengyuan said, “During the New Dynasty Day ceremony, I will have you perform a dance. Make sure to seize the heart of the Emperor of the Great Han Kingdom on this occasion.”

Liao Xueyin gently shook her head. “Father, I have heard you mention that the Emperor of the Great Han Kingdom has a deep affection for Yan Caiqing. I’m afraid…”

“What do you mean?” Liao Chengyuan sensed her implication.

Liao Xueyin said in a soft voice, “If I forcefully stay by the side of the Emperor of the Great Han Kingdom, not only would it make him and Yan Caiqing annoyed, but it could also raise suspicions. I’ve heard that the Emperor of the Great Han Kingdom shares a close bond with his half-brother, Prince Dai, who was born to the same mother. So, instead of choosing the Emperor of the Great Han Kingdom, it might be better to adopt an indirect approach and get closer to Prince Dai.”

Liao Chengyuan pondered for a moment and nodded, “You make a valid point, my child…”

Yazhu Courtyard

Sixteen-year-old Luo Luoluo saw that Luo Yousong had returned, and she ran up to him while holding her skirt, also eating without stopping.

“Father, you’re back.”

“Luo’er, didn’t I tell you not to talk with food in your mouth?” Luo Yousong rubbed his forehead, feeling helpless.

“Father, I can’t help it,” Luo Luoluo continued eating. “You said that we might return to our kingdom once the celebration is over. There are so many delicious foods in the Great Han Kingdom, and I’m afraid I won’t have enough time to taste them all. That’s why I’m putting in so much effort.”

Luo Yousong looked at his daughter’s plump figure and felt a bit worried. If he had known, he wouldn’t have brought her along.

On the ninth day of the third month, the visiting monarchs arrived one after another. In the evening, Prime Minister Wen and other high-ranking officials warmly invited them to the lodging and informed them of the arrangements for the following day’s grand ceremony.

On the tenth day of the third month, the palace ignited dazzling fireworks at dawn, illuminating the sky above the capital. The common people of the capital knelt piously, bowing in the direction of the palace.

The fireworks lasted for a quarter of an hour before subsiding, and it was as if a signal had been given as the people began setting off firecrackers they had prepared in advance. The sound of firecrackers echoed one after another, creating a festive atmosphere like that of the Lunar New Year.

The celebratory ceremony within the palace officially began, with all members of the royal family and civil and military officials gathering in the square of Taihe Palace

The Emperor first paid homage to the heavens and his ancestors, just as during the New Year celebrations. Then, he personally recited a eulogy, and after its completion, the members of the royal family, including the consorts, all knelt in unison.

After the kneeling ceremony, the consorts exited the scene and returned to the harem.

Next, the Grand Historian recited a eulogy to commemorate the glorious achievements of the ancestors and praises the Emperor’s accomplishments.

Huangfu Yuchen made a humble summary and outlined future plans, concluding the New Dynasty Day ceremony.

The ceremonial official shouted, “His Majesty of the Mai Kingdom has traveled a long way to congratulate—His Majesty of the Liao Kingdom has traveled a long way to congratulate—His Majesty of the Wei Kingdom has traveled a long way to congratulate—”

After the announcements, the festive sound of gongs and drums filled the air.

The monarchs, accompanied by their entourages, appeared one by one and stood on the square, looking towards the young Emperor in the bright yellow imperial robe on the throne. They all spoke in unison, “We congratulate the Huangfu Dynasty on its 680th anniversary!”

Huangfu Yuchen announced, “To the esteemed monarchs who have traveled from afar, your hardships and sincerity are deeply appreciated. Please, Your Majesties and distinguished envoys, take your seats!”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“Perform the song and dance,” Huangfu Yuchen instructed Deng Mande.

Deng Mande shouted, “Perform the song and dance—”

The sound of strings and flutes resounded, and a group of beautiful women entered, dancing gracefully and joyfully.

Hou Mailong looked up at the high platform where only Huangfu Yuchen and the dignified Empress were present, and the eunuchs and palace maidens who were accompanying them.

“The Emperor of the Great Han Kingdom didn’t invite his beloved consort, Yan Caiqing, to attend such an important occasion?” Hou Mailong whispered.

Next to him was the emperor of the Wei Kingdom, Hei Zhentian, who was in his forties and exuded an aura of majesty. He replied, “I also noticed just now. It seems that Yan Caiqing is not present.”

Luo Yousong who was at the head of the group guessed, “Perhaps he attended but left right after the New Dynasty Day grand ceremony ended.”

A few enchanting and pleasant laughter caught their attention, and they finally realized that the song and dance had finished. Two groups of women wearing dresses with different colors flooded into the square, each group stunningly beautiful and with impressive figures. In addition, there were two peculiar-looking net gates added on both ends of the square.

Luo Yousong saw a rolling bamboo ball in the square and wondered, “Could it be a game of…?”

Before the words could fully leave his mouth, the sound of different rhythms from the qin and flute instruments rang out simultaneously, sometimes high, sometimes low. The women in the field followed the music, using their feet to kick the ball. With the fast-paced music, the movements of the women in red clothing became quick—running and dancing gracefully. With slow-paced music, the movements of the women in purple clothing became slow—twisting their waists, stretching their arms, lifting their legs—a seductive yet not frivolous posture. It was lively and playful.

Gradually, everyone became fascinated and understood the idea. The women in red and purple clothing followed the cues of the qin and flute instruments, perfectly combining the game of football and dance, providing a delightful spectacle.

A couple of days ago, these monarchs had also visited the football field out of curiosity to watch a football match. The intense competition and seamless coordination between the players easily stirred their emotions. Men’s football showcased masculinity and strength, while women’s football displayed agility and grace. It allowed them to experience a completely different kind of pleasure, and they immersed themselves in it completely.

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A graceful and agile lady in purple ended the game with a beautiful airborne goal.

All the monarchs applauded and praised, “Wonderful!”

The atmosphere was particularly lively.

This female soccer match was organized by the Empress and the four consorts together. It ended smoothly and successfully, and the officials from the Ministry of Rites finally let go of their worries.

Huangfu Yuchen knew that these monarchs had a purpose for this visit, and they would speak up when they couldn’t hold it any longer. He just watched quietly from his throne without saying a word, occasionally sipping tea, appearing leisurely, and letting the performances proceed one after another.

After another three or four performances, King Ye Kezheng of the Xilan Kingdom looked at the other monarchs and said, “Your Majesty, your kingdom is blessed with talented and beautiful women. It is truly a feast for the eyes. I have a daughter who is very good at dancing. I would like to present her dance to Your Majesty. Would you be interested in watching?”

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “This is my honor. However, it is scorching hot even though it’s only March. The princess is like a golden branch and jade leaf, and she should rest under the canopy. But I appreciate the princess’s kindness, thank you.”

Ye Kezheng was momentarily speechless and could only express gratitude on behalf of his daughter. Xilan was a small kingdom, and if they could establish a connection with the prosperous Great Han, there would be

countless benefits. Unexpectedly, Huangfu Yuchen showed completely no interest in meeting his daughter.

Liao Chengyuan glared angrily at Ye Kezheng. Ye Kezheng was too hasty and almost ruined his grand plan.

Liao Xueyin stood up and walked gracefully to the center, bowing to Huangfu Yuchen. Her voice was melodious and her words eloquent, “Your Majesty, the Liao Kingdom is a nomadic nation on the grasslands. I am not afraid of the sun. May I have the honor of dancing for Your Majesty and the other monarchs? I don’t mind admitting that I have been preparing for this day for a long time.”

Huangfu Yuchen smiled faintly and said, “It is my pleasure. Both princesses must have prepared for today for a long time as well. I suddenly realized that my assumption earlier might have unintentionally hurt the Princess of Xilan, and I feel uneasy about it. If the two princesses don’t mind, why not perform together? The phoenix of the grasslands and the spirit of the forest dancing together; just the thought of it makes one eager to see it.”

With these words, Huangfu Yuchen effortlessly shifted everyone’s interest to comparing the two princesses, blurring the original purpose and effect of their dances. Liao Chengyuan and Ye Kezheng were both frustrated but had no choice but to suppress their anger.

One young official sitting next to Yan Xiaojing secretly chuckled, only to be gently tapped on the head by Yan Xiaojing.

“Father!”

It was actually Yan Ge! It turned out that he had been present all along, disguised and wearing the official’s robe, blending in with the other officials.

When Jiang Gan, Luo Wei, and the others first saw an unfamiliar face next to Yan Xiaojing, they were a bit puzzled. It was at this moment that they realized it was Yan Ge and couldn’t help but smile discreetly, feeling extremely envious of Yan Xiaojing.

Meanwhile, the two princesses were worthy of being members of the royal family. They regained their composure, and with the unique pride of royalty, quickly calmed down. The music played by their respective bands began, and they each danced in their own style, trying their best to showcase their most perfect dance moves.

Unfortunately, Huangfu Yuchen's move was too brilliant, and everyone unconsciously began comparing who danced better and who didn't, completely overlooking the artistic conception and charm brought by the two performances.

After the two princesses finished dancing, they realized that something was off. They tried to maintain their composure, bowed, and returned to their seats in silence.

The monarchs who wanted to create more opportunities before the formal test, had failed. They exchanged glances wordlessly and paid more attention to Huangfu Yuchen, this young and powerful emperor.

King Wei Lie of the Mini Kingdom said, "Your Majesty Huangfu, we have visited the capital in the past two days and have seen and heard so many wonderful things. We are curious about the talent behind your kingdom's pens, umbrellas, soap, and even cement. Regardless of who this person is, their talent, ingenuity, and abilities are unparalleled. I wonder if His Majesty would be willing to introduce this person to us?"

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled and said, "To be honest, this person is my beloved consort. But it is not easy to introduce you all to him."

The king of the Feng kingdom spoke up, "As far as I know, His Majesty Huangfu's beloved consort is Yan Caiqing, who is known for his exceptional talents and beauty. He has opened a company in the capital and often moves outside the palace due to business. However, I don't understand why His Majesty Huangfu can't introduce him to us?"

This statement was a bit blunt, implying that Yan Caiqing, as a palace consort, frequently appeared in public, meeting many people. Why couldn't he be introduced to them?

Huangfu Yuchen replied calmly, “Your Majesties may not be aware of this, but my beloved consort acts according to his own wishes. If he is interested in something, there is no need to invite him; he will do it on his own. If he is not, no matter how you try to convince him, it won’t work. He was present during the celebration just now, but now he’s gone somewhere. I really have no way to control him.”

Yan Ge gestured to Yan Xiaojing.

Yan Xiaojing pretended not to notice.

Yan Ge could only wink at Jiang Gan.

Jiang Gan chuckled inwardly, wondering what this person was up to now. He stood up and said, “Your Majesty, we haven’t finished the performances prepared for all the monarchs. Should we continue?”

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “Continue.”

“Yes.”

Yan Ge elegantly raised his sleeve and walked to the front of the stage, bowing to the monarchs, “Your Majesty, this humble servant wishes to present his talents to you and all the monarchs.”

Huangfu Yuchen immediately recognized it was Yan Ge and there was a mix of helplessness and indulgence in his eyes. “Why not? All the monarchs have come from afar, and Official Qin’s performance will surely add to the enjoyment. What would you like to do?”

The Empress, along with all the officials, palace attendants, and guards, recognized Yan Ge’s voice and became spirited, knowing they were about to witness a good show.

Yan Ge said, “I have been diligently practicing martial arts in recent months and feel that my skills have greatly improved. I dare to challenge the masters present here. If I happen to win, Your Majesty can grant me a reward.”

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled, “And what if you lose?”

Yan Ge replied, “If I lose, Your Majesty will naturally reward the winner.”

All the officials burst into laughter.

Huangfu Yuchen readily agreed, “Very well. If you lose one match, the winner will be rewarded with a thousand taels of gold and also your salary deducted for a year.”

“This servant obeys.” Yan Ge looked expectant. “Does that mean I get a thousand taels of gold for each match I win?”

Everyone suppressed their laughter.

Huangfu Yuchen sighed inwardly. Why was his beloved so keen on extorting him?

“That’s the deal.” Huangfu Yuchen smiled, looking at all the monarchs. “This official of mine indeed has some skills. All the monarchs are in for a treat.”

Yan Ge bowed to the monarchs, saying, “If any of Your Majesties are interested, you can also add some rewards.”

Afterward, Yan Ge took a quick walk around the area and asked, “Who would like to spar with me?”

Zhang Yingjie stepped forward and said, “Your Majesty, I have long heard of Official Qin’s exceptional martial arts, but I have never had the chance to test my skills against him. I’d like to learn from Official Qin.”

Huangfu Yuchen introduced Zhang Yingjie to the other monarchs, “This is General Zhang, the left commander of the Imperial Guards.”

“Alright, you two can have a friendly exchange. It’s a rare opportunity today. The winner will receive a reward of a thousand taels of gold.”

The officials' eyes lit up. Since Yan Caiqing dared to say this in front of all the monarchs, he must be confident of winning. This was a rare opportunity to present them with gifts, and they spoke up one after another.

"Your Majesty, this humble official would like to add a reward of a pair of blackwood bracelets."

Everyone was amazed. Blackwood, also known as dark wood, didn't rot after being buried underground for thousands of years. It absorbed the essence of the sun and the moon, making it a precious and spiritual material. A pair of blackwood bracelets was worth at least a thousand taels.

"This humble official would also like to add a reward, a calligraphy piece by the talented Zhang Xinzhi."

"This official offers a landscape painting by the famous artist, Chen Yuezhi."

…

Since the officials couldn't bring personal items to the celebration, a nearby ceremonial officer recorded their offerings on paper.

The monarchs didn't notice anything unusual and thought the officials were merely echoing Emperor Huangfu Yuchen to liven up the atmosphere.

Yan Ge's eyes sparkled with joy; this time, he would make a big profit.

Huangfu Yuchen said, "Alright. You two may begin."

A guard stepped forward and presented them with swords.

Zhang Yingjie chuckled and said to Yan Ge, "Official Qin, please enlighten me. If I offend you in any way, please don't take offense."

Yan Ge smirked, "It seems like Master Zhang is quite confident. I've heard about your ever-changing Illusion Star Sword Technique, it's hard to predict and rarely matched. Today, I want to experience it for myself. If I win, you must treat me to a feast at Liuxian Pavilion."

“Fair enough, fair enough,” Zhang Yingjie chuckled.

After some staged pleasantries, they shouted “begin” and drew their swords.

After exchanging around ten moves, Zhang Yingjie sensed that Yan Ge’s internal strength surpassed his own, and he gave him a surprised glance. Yan Ge signaled him to continue. Though initially disheartened, Zhang Yingjie soon discovered that Yan Ge was secretly guiding and advising him during their match. This pleasant surprise led him to gain insights quickly due to the fast pace of their spar.

To those unfamiliar with martial arts, it seemed like they were evenly matched, only a few truly knowledgeable individuals understood the truth and unknowingly became engrossed.

After about a hundred moves, Yan Ge raised his sword, suppressing Zhang Yingjie’s blade, and pointed it at his neck.

“Master Zhang, admit defeat.”

“I yield.”

Huangfu Yuchen applauded, “Excellent. Bring a reward of a thousand taels of gold for Official Qin.”

Yan Ge accepted the gold and the rewards from the other officials, placing them on his table with a deliberate look of arrogance. He then said to Huangfu Yuchen, “Your Majesty, I’d also like to take on two opponents at once. If anyone can defeat me, I’ll offer everything I’ve won in the first battle. I wonder if anyone dares to take on my challenge.”

As he spoke, he cast a sidelong glance at the other monarchs.

The officials of Great Han understood the situation instantly and knew that it wasn’t the time for their people to step up. Hence, they remained silent.

Huangfu Yuchen appeared surprised as he looked at Yan Ge and gently said, “Official Qin, won’t you reconsider?”

Jiang Gan, Yang Zhuo, Jiang Guangyuan, and Grand Tutor You all lowered their heads simultaneously, thinking to themselves, ‘Your Majesty, Yan Caiqing, you two are quite good at acting.”

“I’ll do it!” Behind King Hei Zhentian, a tall and robust man in military attire suddenly stood up and strode to the center of the square. He bowed to Huangfu Yuchen, “Foreign Envoy – Leader of the Wei Kingdom Imperial Guards – Bai Shaobai, pays respects to Emperor Huangfu.”

“And me!” Similarly, another sturdy guard behind King Hei Zhentian stepped forward, “Foreign Envoy – Rank Three Sword Guard Zou Xiangying, pays respects to Emperor Huangfu.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s smile became somewhat forced, and he nodded, “Very well. If you two emissaries win, I’ll reward each of you with a thousand taels of gold.”

Yan Ge hurriedly said, “Your Majesty, if I win, can I get two thousand taels?”

Huangfu Yuchen said nonchalantly, “Let’s wait until you win, Official Qin.”

A glimmer of amusement appeared in Hei Zhentian’s eyes as he declared loudly, “In that case, I want to also add a reward of two thousand taels of gold.”

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The monarchs of several small Kingdoms added some rewards one after another, which were recorded by the ceremonial officials and loudly announced.

“Master Yan, Official Qin is going to return with a full load this time,” Jiang Gan teased Yan Xiaojing.

“Yes,” Grand Tutor You stroked his beard and smiled, “Official Qin is extraordinary.”

Yan Xiaojing sighed heavily with a helpless expression and shook his head.

But other ministers could see the smile in his eyes. Master Yan was quite indulgent towards his son. However, thinking about it, who wouldn’t like having a son as capable as Yan Caiqing. He was bold enough to trick even foreign monarchs, moreover so skillfully.

Yan Ge’s gaze fell on Bai Shaobai, and after a moment, he slowly shifted it to Zou Xiangying. He clasped his fists together. “Please enlighten me.”

Bai Shaobai and Zou Xiangying remained silent. Zou Xiangying took a few steps toward the center of the venue, while Bai Shaobai stood still at the side, making his intentions clear without words. The attendants presented Zou Xiangying’s weapon, but he didn’t take it.

“Please, Official Qin, enlighten us,” Zou Xiangying said politely.

Yan Ge frowned unhappily and swung his sword back without even looking. The sword landed accurately in a palace maid’s arms as he declared arrogantly. “Please!”

“Ha!” Zou Xiangying let out a deep shout and attacked Yan Ge’s chest with his right fist. A strong gust of wind followed his strike, causing willow seeds to fly into the air for a moment before gently descending again after a certain distance.

What incredible speed and formidable strength! The audience unconsciously sat up, watching the two with concern.

Yan Ge calmly contracted his chest and bent his waist, then swiftly grabbed Zou Xiangying’s wrist with his right hand, leveraging it to leap into the air. He appeared behind Zou Xiangying and kicked his spine with his right foot.

His movements were too fast, and Zou Xiangying seemed unable to react. The officials of Great Han couldn’t see through the moves and smiled.

However, just as Yan Ge’s heel was about to touch Zou Xiangying, the latter suddenly moved, extending his left arm like a thick and sturdy stick, swiftly rotating his robust body and swinging his left arm back, smashing into Yan Ge’s leg.

“Ah!” Some ministers nervously exclaimed.

But Yan Ge didn’t disappoint them. In a split second, he used the inertia to spin in mid-air, pressing his right palm on Zou Xiangying’s shoulder and leaping up again, sweeping his left leg toward Zou Xiangying’s waist. Zou Xiangying’s counterattack missed, and he was struck on the leg, causing him to stagger a few steps forward.

However, he was evidently skilled. He managed to stabilize himself after two steps and quickly turned around to guard against Yan Ge’s attack from behind.

Little did he know that Yan Ge was too fast. Just as Zou Xiangying turned sideways, he took a palm strike to the back. His expression changed slightly, but he withstood the blow and retaliated with a fierce fist attack against Yan Ge.

And so, Yan Ge and Zou Xiangying fought for about eighty moves. Yan Ge locked both of Zou Xiangying's wrists in his hands and looked towards Bai Shaobai, showing a polite and composed expression. "Master Bai, if you choose to forfeit—"

Huangfuyu Chen smiled gently while stroking his lips. It seemed like his beloved loved acting. What to do? Of course, he would accompany him to the end.

King Hei Zhentian, Bai Shaobai, and Zou Xiangying's expressions all changed. This was unacceptable!

Yan Ge managed to provoke both Bai Shaobai and Zou Xiangying. Bai Shaobai leaped forward, attacking Yan Ge's face and left arm.

Yan Ge had no choice but to release Zou Xiangying.

Zou Xiangying and Bai Shaobai looked at each other, and with a lightness technique, they rushed to the guards holding the weapons, and they both got a weapon.

Yan Ge seemed to be shocked by their momentum. Startled, he took a step back before picking up his own sword.

Huangfu Yuchen said nervously: "You three, remember to be measured."

Zou Xiangying and Bai Shaobai raised their swords and slashed at Yan Ge at the same time. The blades were bright white, and as they swung, they shone golden in the sun, looking both dazzling and sharp.

Yan Ge immediately raise his sword to resist.

The three of them fought for over two quarters of an hour. Bai Shaobai kicked Yan Ge, who fell to the ground and rolled before jumping up again. He opened his mouth and spat out a mouthful of bright red blood.

Yan Xiaojing's face turned pale, almost getting up, but Jiang Gan held him down in time and whispered, "Master Yan, calm down, look at His Majesty."

Huangfu Yuchen’s expression had also changed, but he remained calm.

Yan Xiaojing glared at Yan Ge.

Jiang Gan secretly laughed, knowing that Yan Caiqing would probably be scolded after the ceremony.

The ministers of Great Han were all nervous and solemn, and some couldn’t help but look at the Emperor, hoping he would speak and end the competition soon.

Bai Shaobai and Zou Xiangying exchanged a glance, a satisfied smile flashing through their eyes.

“Official Qin, why don’t we stop here,” Bai Shaobai said with a tolerant expression.

Yan Ge snorted lightly, and moved forward with his sword, using elusive sword techniques to create numerous sword shadows. Bai Shaobai and Zou Xiangying felt surrounded by a high wall of sword energy and were surprised. They resisted with all their strength but could only exchange about thirty moves with Yan Ge. Soon, Yan Ge kicked Zou Xiangying away, while Bai Shaobai had a sword pointed at his neck.

“Who said we should stop?” Yan Ge smiled.

“You…you’re not..?” Bai Shaobai looked surprised, “Just now… you already spat blood. Why do you still have such strong internal strength?”

Zou Xiangying also approached, clutching his abdomen as he looked at Yan Ge in disbelief.

“Huh?” Yan Ge was stunned, then showed a suddenly enlightened expression, “You mean just now? That wasn’t blood. I ate a red fruit earlier, and I hadn’t had time to swallow it. I almost choked on it when Master Bai kicked me just now, so I quickly spit it out.”

Zou Xiangying and Bai Shaobai looked dumbfounded.

Everyone present: “…”

The ministers of Great Han desperately controlled their facial expressions, trying hard not to laugh. ‘My goodness, Yan Caiqing, you are too talented!’

Hei Zhentian’s face was extremely ugly.

At this moment, a palace maid reported, “The Crown Prince has arrived. Prince Jin has arrived.”

Two handsome boys who looked seven or eight years old smiled as they stepped onto the stage. Yan Jin and the Crown Prince did not find Yan Ge at Tenglong Palace, so they guessed he was still here and came together.

“Greetings Father Emperor, Greetings Mother Empress.”

“Rise.” Huangfu Yuchen gestured for the two of them to take their seats.

The Crown Prince sat in the position of the Crown Prince, and Yan Jin sat beside him. The two of them looked around curiously, trying to figure out what had happened just now.

“The two noble emissaries from the Wei Kingdom have yielded,” Huangfu Yuchen declared, “Reward Official Qin with two thousand taels of gold. The sparring session ends here—”

“Your Majesty!” Yan Ge wiped the corners of his mouth and quickly glanced at the pile of gold on his seat, restraining his excitement. “I dare to beg, I want to challenge four opponents at once.”

Everyone was in an uproar.

Everyone including the ministers of Great Han felt somewhat anxious. ‘ Yan Caiqing, quit while you’re ahead. What if you lose the next match? All your previous efforts will be in vain.’

However, Yan Xiaojing remained calm at this moment, lifting his tea cup and sipping leisurely, planning to settle accounts with his son after the ceremony!

The monarchs of the Wei, Liao, and Mai kingdoms had faint smiles, thinking this was perfect.

Huangfu Yuchen's face turned serious, "Official Qin, are you short of money recently?"

Yan Ge cupped his fists and replied earnestly, "Not hiding anything from Your Majesty, I am a bit short of money. Actually… it's because my wife spends too much money."

Yan Xiaojing sprayed out the tea in his mouth and coughed violently.

Huangfu Yuchen's brow twitched, and he sighed helplessly.

The Empress covered her mouth and chuckled softly.

Jiang Gan, Luo Wei, Grand Tutor You, and the others couldn't hold back and laughed softly.

Yan Jin suddenly brightened up and leaned close to the Crown Prince's ear, "Don't show any emotions—Minister Qin is Papa."

The Crown Prince understood and remained composed.

Huangfu Yuchen looked at the sky and tried to bring up an excuse. "This weather—"

"Your Majesty," King Hui Mailong suddenly said loudly, "Since Minister Qin of your esteemed kingdom is in such high spirits, we are willing to accompany him."

"King Mailong," Huangfu Yuchen's expression was hesitant, "The other monarchs have been exposed to the sun for quite a while. In my opinion—"

"Not hiding anything from Your Majesty," Liao Chengyuan smiled, "This time, I brought some warriors with me, and they all want to learn from Minister Qin."

Huangfu Yuchen then nodded, “Since that’s the case, I don’t want to dampen the spirits of all the monarchs. I’ll still offer four thousand taels of gold, and whoever wins gets to keep it. Minister Qin, if you can take on four opponents and win, the four thousand taels of gold will naturally be yours. If you lose, all the rewards you’ve received earlier will go into the national treasury.”

“This…” Yan Ge hesitated for a while and finally said hesitantly, “I’ll comply with the order.”

King Hei Zhentian said, “Your Majesty Huangfu has set the example, so we should follow suit. I’ll also offer four thousand taels of gold, and whoever wins, it belongs to them.”

King Hui Mailong shouted loudly, “I’ll also offer four thousand taels of gold, along with a pair of Phoenix Eye Sky Pearls.”

King Liao Chengyuan said, “I’ll offer four thousand taels of gold, along with a Deep Sea Rose Pearl.”

…

Everyone could tell that this was a competition among the major kingdoms. The other monarchs only offered a thousand taels of gold each, merely for show.

After all the monarchs had made their offerings, Yan Xiaojing arched his hand towards the throne and said, “Reporting to Your Majesty, I offer three thousand taels of gold.”

The foreign monarchs and ministers were somewhat surprised, subconsciously looking at Huangfu Yuchen to gauge his reaction. Could this official really be so wealthy? He couldn’t be corrupt, right?

However, they saw Huangfu Yuchen nod slightly, his expression unchanged.

The other monarchs were surprised and whispered to each other, asking who Yan Xiaojing was and what background he had.

Someone in the know explained, “That is Yan Xiaojing, the Minister of Rites in Great Han Kingdom, and Yan Caiqing’s father.”

They all suddenly understood. No wonder. Yan Caiqing is so wealthy, it’s no surprise that his father is wealthy too.

While Huangfu Yuchen’s thoughts were elusive to the ministers of the Great Han Kingdom, and it was uncertain whether Yan Caiqing could win, Yan Xiaojing’s words were like a secret signal. The ministers immediately summoned the ceremonial officials and told them how much they had offered. If they could collude with the Emperor and Yan Caiqing to trick the other kingdoms, why wouldn’t they?

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“Come here.” Yan Jin waved to a ceremonial official and even stood up, saying, “I offer ten golden pearls.”

Everyone burst into laughter.

The Little Crown Prince also spoke, “I offer a jade fan. It doesn’t matter who wins; friendship comes first, and the competition is secondary.”

Everyone nodded in approval, looking at the Little Crown Prince with admiration.

Then, King Hui Mailong turned to someone behind him and spoke with authority, “Alichang, you go.”

Alichang, a burly man of almost two meters, with a face like a leopard, pressed his right hand against his right shoulder and bowed, walking to the center of the square.

Liao Chengyuan called, “Lia.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” A woman dressed in a black dress stood up slowly. She was dressed like a palace maid, with a gloomy aura around her that made people feel uneasy.

Hei Zhentian called out, “Gong Zhili.”

Gong Zhili exuded a fierce aura, indicating he was not someone to be underestimated.

King Wei Lie said, “Alan.”

Alan was short, not as strong as Alichang and the other three, and seemed like an ordinary person. At first glance, no one would think he possessed any martial skills.

Alichang, Lia, Gong Zhili, and Alan stood in a row and paid their respects to Huangfu y, saying, “Emperor Huangfu Yuchen.”

“Four esteemed emissaries, no need for formalities,” Huangfu Yuchen said, “You may just go through the motions; there’s no need to get tense.”

“Understood!”

The four surrounded Yan Ge in a coordinated manner.

“Baby, these four are all skilled, and shouldn’t be underestimated. Be careful,” Huangfu Yuchen transmitted to Yan Ge.

“Don’t worry,” Yan Ge said confidently.

He effortlessly faced off against the four men, handling them with ease.

These four were undoubtedly formidable experts by the fact that the four monarchs selected them. However, they quickly sensed Yan Ge’s ease and comfort, which astonished them, and they looked at each other in disbelief.

“Father, that Official Qin seems very relaxed,” Liao Xueyin whispered to Liao Chengyuan.

Liao Chengyuan maintained his composure, even if things didn’t go well, as a powerful monarch, he couldn’t show displeasure on his face. “It seems that things with Prince Dai are not going well either.”

Liao Xueyin nodded slightly, her gaze drifting towards Huangfu Yuhu who was watching the martial arts competition. In her eyes, Prince Dai’s appearance was not inferior to Emperor Huangfu Yuchen, but like Emperor Huangfu Yuchen, he showed no interest in her beauty, which deeply hurt her pride and self-esteem.

Alichang and the others felt that they were going to lose.

Lia temporarily withdrew from the battle circle and bowed to the audience, saying, “Emperor Huangfu Yuchen, my expertise lies in hidden weapons. I wonder…”

Liao Chengyuan reprimanded, “Lia, you must not be impolite!”

“No worries,” Yan Ge smiled. “Since there’s a prize at stake, it’s only fair for Lady Lia to use her true skills. However, since this competition is limited to a certain number of moves, we should restrict the number of hidden weapons she uses. What do the esteemed monarchs think?”

Hui Mailong, Liao Chengyuan, and the others all nodded.

“You have a point.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “In that case, Lady Lia can use a maximum of twenty hidden weapons.”

“Yes!” Lia responded and without anyone noticing her hand movements, two hidden weapons shot towards Yan Ge.

Yan Ge used his sword to deflect them and with a “ding”, the two hidden weapons were pinned to a tree trunk.

Alichang and the other two seized the opportunity to attack, but Yan Ge held his ground firmly, leaving no room for any vulnerabilities.

Lia launched her hidden weapons again. Both hands moved continuously, and dozens of hidden weapons shot through the air with a whoosh.

Yan Ge still deflected them with his sword and Lia realized that the direction in which the hidden weapons flew was the same. When she looked in that direction, her expression changed. Yan Ge had formed her twenty hidden weapons into the shape of the character “ ” (heaven).

Yan Ge estimated that around a hundred and twenty or so moves had passed. His figure moved rapidly and unpredictably, and when he finally stood still, Lia and the others had been immobilized with their acupoints sealed, motionless like statues, each in a different pose.

The audience was astonished.

“Four esteemed envoys, you’ve been lenient.” Yan Ge grinned as he clasped his hands together.

Huangfu Yuchen laughed heartily, “Official Qin, your martial arts have improved significantly. Now, please release the acupoints of the four esteemed envoys.”

“Of course.” Yan Ge pressed the acupoints of the four, then clasped his fists, handed the sword to an attendant, and returned to his seat. He surreptitiously glanced at the note recording the total amount of gold.

Yan Xiaojing glanced at Yan Ge, then turned away and didn’t look at him again.

Hui Mailong, Liao Chengyuan, Hei Zhentian, and Wei Lie looked at each other with great astonishment. Just who was this Official Qin? His martial arts were unexpectedly formidable. The four top experts couldn’t defeat him even when they teamed up!

However, this competition was just an episode, and not their ultimate purpose in coming to Great Han Kingdom. After adjusting their emotions, they regained their composure.

They realized that the roundabout approach they took with Emperor Huangfu didn’t work at all; it was better to be direct.

“Your Majesty Huangfu,” Hui Mailong said, “we have come from afar not only to congratulate Your Majesty but also for another reason.”

“Oh?” Huangfu Yuchen said, “I’m all ears.”

Hui Mailong looked around and finally fixed his gaze on Huangfu Yuchen. With a strong demeanor, he said, “Great Han Kingdom has been flourishing under Your Majesty’s governance and the talented Yan Caiqing. Whether it’s pens, delicacies, beautiful garments, or bicycles, I won’t elaborate on

them all. Especially the invention of cement, which has earned great praise. I wonder what Your Majesty thinks about it?"

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, "This is my fortune."

"I have a request." Hui Mailong continued.

Huangfu Yuchen's ink-black eyes narrowed, but his expression remained unchanged. "King Mailong can speak his mind."

"I would like to invite Yan Caiqing to visit the Mai Kingdom as a guest and seek his advice on our kingdom's development," Hui Mailong said.

Huangfu Yuchen's mind seemed to race at lightning speed. Hui Mailong's words sparked an idea in his mind—He had always been unable to figure out why the Centipede Organization wanted to capture his beloved. Now, he suddenly had a thought: Could it be that the Centipede Organization wanted to capture his baby to exploit his talents?

The ministers of Great Han showed grim expressions upon hearing Hui Mailong's words.

Hui Mailong seemed not to notice and continued, "We have majestic mountains and rivers, diverse cultures, especially in spring, there is lush grass and singing birds, creating exceptionally beautiful scenery. I believe Yan Caiqing would enjoy it there. Also, forgive me for amusing you; I actually have a new male consort who is the same age as Yan Caiqing. They would surely get along well."

No one believed his words. Hui Mailong was almost sixty years old, and if he liked men, he would have had several male consorts when he was young instead of waiting until now.

Hui Mailong continued to prattle self righteously, and Huangfu Yuchen's lips curved into a cold smile.

Hui Mailong remained unfazed. He dared to speak like this because he had something to rely on. Although Great Han Kingdom had indeed developed

well, its strength was only above average among the dozens of kingdoms in the surrounding area. If he increased the troops at the border between the two kingdoms, he could frighten Huangfu Yuchen and force him to make concessions for the sake of his people, even if he cherished Yan Caiqing.

“Your Majesty, you have indeed put me in a difficult situation,” Huangfu Yuchen said calmly. “Yan Ge is my beloved. How could I bear to send him to the Mai Kingdom?”

Yan Ge leaned on the table and raised his head in bewilderment, “Yuchen, did you call me?”

All foreigners looked at Yan Ge in unison. Yuchen? Wasn’t that Emperor Huangfu Yuchen’s given name? What was the relationship between this Official Qin and the emperor? How could he dare to address him directly by his name in public?

“Xiao Ge, is that you?”

Yan Ge seemed to have just remembered the situation. He stood up, tore off the disguise on his face, and smiled, “Your Majesty, forgive me. I got bored inside the hall, so I came out for a casual look.”

Huangfu Yuchen didn’t mind, “Hmm. And where is Official Qin?” Of course, there was no Official Qin, but since they were acting, there couldn’t be any flaws.

He and Yan Ge understood each other perfectly. “He is resting in the side hall.”

Hui Mailong and Liao Chengyuan stood up in surprise, looking at Yan Ge in disbelief. Could it be that he was the renowned Yan Caiqing?

Yan Ge walked to the center of the square with a smile, bowing to Hui Mailong and the others, “Respected monarchs, I apologize for any previous offenses. I hope you can forgive me.”

All envoys carefully scrutinized him and immediately understood why Emperor Huangfu Yuchen favored him. Not only was he talented, but he also possessed outstanding looks, with a smiling expression that was highly endearing.

A consort has such exceptional martial arts skills! Hui Mailong and Liao Chengyuan were still in shock.

Hei Zhentian had to speak on their behalf, “ Yan Caiqing, you’re too modest.”

“Earlier, it seemed that all the monarchs mentioned someone named Yan,” Yan Ge asked knowingly.

Hui Mailong dared not bring up the previous topic again. This Yan Caiqing’s martial arts were unfathomable; if they were to take him to the Mai Kingdom, he probably wouldn’t even know how he died. Now that he thought about it, Yan Caiqing might have been already guessed his plan, so he put on this act. Not only did he calmly take away tens of thousands of gold from them, but he also used his profound martial arts to express his attitude.

Hui Mailong’s Grand Tutor He spoke up, “Please forgive me Your Majesty Huangfu and Yan Caiqing. Our emperor heard that Yan Caiqing appreciates beautiful scenery, so he boldly extended the invitation. However, Great Han Kingdom currently needs Yan Caiqing and I’m sure he is occupied.”

Yan Ge stood with his hands behind his back, Looking elegant and suave, “I see. Xiguan Pass is under the Qiongshan Mountain. The sky is like a vast expanse, covering the four wildernesses. The sky is boundless, the wild is vast, and the flying grass reveals cattle and sheep. Mai has more grasslands than Xiguan Pass, so I imagine the scenery is even more beautiful. I thank the king of the Mai Kingdom for the gracious invitation. If I have the chance in the future, I will definitely visit to appreciate the grassland scenery.”

Hui Mailong said solemnly, “You are welcome.”

Some civil officials quietly repeated, “Xiguan Pass is under the Qiongshan Mountain. The sky is like a vast expanse, covering the four wildernesses. The sky is boundless, the wild is vast, and the flying grass reveals cattle and sheep… What beautiful verses!”

“Only a few lines depict the abundance and grandeur of the grassland at the border. The atmosphere is magnificent. These are indeed beautiful verses!”

Yan Ge returned to the table.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Earlier, King Mailong used the term ‘we.’ Do the other monarchs have a second reason for this visit?”

Although displaying his personal strength impressed the monarchs, it wouldn’t deter them from pursuing their goals. They still had things to discuss.

Liao Chengyuan said, “Indeed. We have come for cement. We hope His Majesty Huangfu can open up foreign trade for your kingdom’s cement.” He didn’t fear Emperor Huangfu Yuchen. Liao Kingdom was powerful, and together with the Mai Kingdom, Great Han couldn’t overpower each other. So, even if they were blunt, it wouldn’t be an issue.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Since all the monarchs know about the existence of cement, you must also be aware that the cement currently produced in Great Han is only enough to meet domestic demand.”

Hui Mailong smiled faintly, “Your Majesty Huangfu, we do understand that. That’s why we are willing to pay a high price to purchase the formula for cement from Great Han. We understand the importance of cement, and it’s very tempting.”

Hei Zhentian added lightly, “When people can’t resist temptation, they often do irrational things.”

The square fell silent.

Huangfu Yuchen remained composed and looked at the sky, “It’s getting late. Everyone, please move to the Reception Hall for lunch. I have prepared another exciting program for you in the afternoon.”

Since they would reconvene in the afternoon, Liao Chengyuan and the others decided not to discuss cement matters further and followed Huangfu Yuchen.

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Huangfu Yuchen waved to Yan Ge.

Yan Ge ordered some people to send all the gold, silver, and jewels he had acquired to the Tenglong Palace before walking over to Huangfu Yuchen.

The two exchanged a smile.

Huangfu Yuchen looked Yan Ge up and down; it was the first time he had seen him in official attire. Yan Ge exuded an air of righteousness and vitality in his official garb, which delighted Huangfu Yuchen.

“How does it feel? Not bad, right?” Yan Ge raised his head proudly.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded with a smile, “How about I grant you an official position?”

“No,” Yan Ge quickly waved his hand, “I don’t want to take up a position.”

Feeling the gazes that were fixed on them from all directions, Huangfu Yuchen tightly held Yan Ge’s hand. His baby was excellent and well-liked, and it was only natural for others to be attracted to him, but he wouldn’t allow anyone to take his treasure away.

Although Yan Ge was puzzled by his sudden gesture, he naturally held Huangfu Yuchen’s hand and smiled at him.

Huangfu Yuchen’s heart softened, and he said dotingly, “The afternoon’s program will be exciting. Let’s go together.”

“Yes.” Yan Ge nodded.

The monarchs watched the two of them interact as if no one was around and they understood one thing: it wouldn’t be easy to break apart their relationship.

The state banquet lunch was sumptuous, and the monarchs temporarily set aside national affairs to enjoy the delicacies. Until they were about seventy to eighty percent full, Wei Lie brought up the issue of cement again.

“Your Majesty Huangfu, regarding the matter of cement…”

Huangfu Yuchen waved his hand, “King Wei, savoring food requires full attention to truly appreciate its beauty. Otherwise, what distinguishes delicacies from ordinary food? It might be difficult for you to taste authentic Great Han cuisine after you return to your kiny. The matter of cement can wait. After enjoying the program in the afternoon, we can discuss it then. What do you think, King Wei?”

“Hehe, His Majesty Huangfu is right. I was too impatient,” Wei Lie raised his cup, “I toast to His Majesty. Please.”

“Please.”

After the sumptuous state banquet lunch, the monarchs returned to their lodgings to rest briefly.

As the afternoon approached, the monarchs and envoys, guided by the ceremonial officials, arrived at the military training ground.

Hui Mailong and the others exchanged glances; by this point, they should be able to guess Huangfu Yuchen’s intentions. He was likely to hold a military exercise as a warning. However, none of them took this military exercise seriously. They were well aware of the military strength and forces of Great Han Kingdom, which were not enough to intimidate them. They wanted to see what Huangfu Yuchen thought would impress them.

The monarchs remained composed and took their seats as guided by the ceremonial officials. Others also took their seats.

Yan Ge changed back to his regular clothes and sat beside Huangfu Yuchen.

Yan Jin and the young crown prince also sat nearby. Huangfu Yuchen had deliberately brought the young crown prince to experience the unique atmosphere of the military training ground.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “I remember when the late emperor was in power, all the monarchs had visited Great Han Kingdom, and he held a military exercise. Today, I’m following the example of the late emperor to conduct a military demonstration. I hope all the monarchs can witness and offer guidance, as you did back then.”

“Your Majesty Huangfu, you flatter us. This is excellent. I’m also curious to see how Great Han Kingdom’s military strength compares to my kingdom,” Hui Mailong attempted to sound humble, but a trace of arrogance inadvertently appeared in his expression, showing his confidence in his Kingdom’s military power.

Liao Chengyuan and others all concurred, but they were somewhat absent-minded.

Yan Ge gave a cold smile. He had played a significant role in the training of these Imperial Guards. He had written a comprehensive training plan for them, including daily spontaneous trumpet gatherings to train their responsiveness, daily running and weight-bearing exercises to build their physical endurance, daily practice of equestrian skills, archery, and sword techniques for targeted training. There were also sporadic simulated combat exercises and even exercises to develop their thinking ability, cultivating the soldiers’ adaptability and emergency response capabilities. He dared to say that no other kingdom’s military training could match this level of thoroughness. Since Huangfu Yuchen decided to hold this military exercise, he must have some big moves up his sleeve.

Huangfu Yuchen signaled to Deng Mande.

Deng Mande whispered something to Xiao Changzi beside him.

“The military exercise begins now!”

Upon receiving the signal, Yang Zhuo, who had been waiting outside, immediately led five thousand soldiers to march forward.

“Thump! Thump! Thump…” The uniform and rhythmic footsteps shook the ground, and the atmosphere of the training ground instantly changed, becoming solemn and majestic, enveloping the entire training ground.

Hui Mailong casually looked over, his expression unconcerned, but it suddenly turned serious. Was this Huangfu Yuchen’s army? The sturdy black helmets, the imposing black armor, the bright spears, and the sturdy boots all sent a shiver down his spine based on their appearance alone.

“Attention! At ease! Left turn, right turn…”

Yang Zhuo gave the command again, “Stab!”

Five thousand soldiers thrust their spears forward, shouting “Kill!” in unison with a chilling aura.

Yang Zhuo then commanded, “Slash!”

The soldiers all drew their swords at the same time, once again shouting, “Kill!”

“Fire arrows!”

“Kill!”

“Defend!”

“Kill!”

“Defend!”

“Kill!”

…

It had to be said; the momentum was intimidating, and the killing intent was shocking. However, the monarchs were self-confident that their own armies could achieve the same level. They couldn’t help but feel puzzled. Was this what Huangfu Yuchen wanted to show them?

Yan Ge blinked at Huangfu Yuchen.

“Don’t worry, baby,” Huangfu Yuchen chuckled and whispered, “I did it on purpose. Although the purpose of this military exercise is to impress them, we can’t reveal all our cards. Let’s start with these basic exercises and test their patience. When they become impatient, we’ll unleash our trump card.”

“What’s the trump card? Can you tell me?” Yan Ge was extremely curious. He could tell that Huangfu Yuchen was in a very good mood.

Huangfu Yuchen smiled, “You’ll know soon.”

The military training continued.

At first, Hui Mailong and the others watched attentively, but as time passed, their patience waned.

After nearly half an hour, Huangfu Yuchen seemingly casually brushed Yan Ge’s hair.

Across the training ground, a palace maid lifted her head and then lowered it, seemingly intentionally or unintentionally.

Upon seeing this, Yang Zhuo loudly shouted, “Five Tigers and Five Sheep Formation!”

The five thousand soldiers quickly and neatly dispersed to form a “V” shape, all lying down.

“What are they doing?” Hei Zhentian wondered.

“Who knows,” Wei Lie muttered.

Yang Zhuo shouted, “Throw!”
Suddenly, a soldier in the front row pulled something from his waist and threw it forward. The object hit the ground, and with a loud “boom”, dust and smoke billowed, churning in the air.
“Throw, throw, throw!”
“Boom! Boom! Boom!”
Three more explosions followed.
Hui Mailong and Liao Chengyuan’s expressions changed drastically. They stood up in astonishment, looking at the rolling smoke and dust in the training ground.
What was that just now?!

Yan Ge widened his eyes in surprise. “Yuchen, that was…”

“It’s impressive, isn’t it?” Huangfu Yuchen hugged him and explained, “Recently, our troops stationed at Qingxi Mountain accidentally discovered a colorless smoke that easily explodes when ignited. I thought of using this smoke in military matters. It has proven to be effective.”

Yan Ge gaped in shock. ‘Isn’t colorless smoke an odorless and colorless gas? Could it be methane? Methane is widely distributed in nature, a simple organic compound, odorless and colorless, known as natural gas, marsh gas, pit gas, etc.’

“Why didn’t you tell me about this?”

Huangfu Yuchen held his hand, “Baby, I didn’t intend to hide it from you. This smoke is too dangerous. Many soldiers sacrificed their lives when it was discovered, and we lost more than a dozen men during the military department’s experiments with these ‘explosive bottles.’ I was afraid you might want to experiment with it, so I kept it from you.”

Yan Ge was both angry and helpless. “This gas is indeed very dangerous! That’s why you should have told me. Did you personally experiment with it?”

Huangfu Yuchen quickly shook his head, “No, the military department’s people were also concerned about its dangers and insisted on not allowing

me to observe it."

Annoyed, Yan Ge said, "After dealing with the matters here, I'll settle accounts with you."

"Baby…" Huangfu Yuchen appeased him, gently squeezing his hand.

Yan Ge glanced at the training ground, ignoring him.

"Your Majesty…," Luo Yousong of the Youji Kingdom had an expression of shock and horror. He urgently asked, "What was that just now?"

Huangfu Yuchen replied indifferently, "Oh, that's a new weapon invented by our Kingdom, called the 'Bottle Explosion'."

"Bottle Explosion?"

Hui Mailong and the others looked at each other, remaining speechless for a long time.

Huangfu Yuchen casually continued, "According to the people from our military department, this thing has tremendous killing power. If you confine one hundred chickens in a chicken coop the size of a room and throw an explosive bottle inside, it can kill all one hundred chickens. I haven't personally witnessed it, so perhaps their words are exaggerated."

Hui Mailong and the others understood and all had shocked and horrified expressions on their faces.

Huangfu Yuchen gestured for Yang Zhuo to take the soldiers back and looked at them puzzled. "What's wrong with all of you? Please sit. By the way, about the cement, this is how it is: our kingdom's cement production is indeed not much, currently just enough to meet the needs of the capital city. However, I believe the production will increase in the future. Our kingdom has always upheld the principle of friendship and exchange with other nations. I can promise you that as long as the cement production increases, I will definitely sell cement to all of you. You can rest assured about this."

Hui Mailong, Liao Chengyuan, Hei Zhentian, and Wei Lie, who had previously considered using force to threaten Huangfu Yuchen to sell them cement, had no trace of arrogance on their faces now. It seemed that they had lost all confidence in their kingdoms' military strength in an instant.

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After exchanging pleasantries with the other monarchs, Huangfu Yuchen let his guests be escorted back to their lodgings. He returned to the Tenglong Palace with Yan Ge.

Rarely seeing his beloved with a stern face, Huangfu Yuchen felt both curious and guilty. Regardless of being right or wrong, he knew he should apologize first.

“Baby, I was wrong. Please don’t be angry.”

Yan Ge was indeed very angry. Methane was extremely dangerous, especially for those unfamiliar with it. Huangfu Yuchen was intelligent to think of using this gas in military applications, but it frightened him when he heard that Huangfu Yuchen had been experimenting with it.

“My love,” Huangfu Yuchen embraced him from behind, planting a kiss on his cheek.

Fortunately, nothing happened to Huangfu Yuchen due to the methane, and after a while, Yan Ge’s anger subsided.

Huangfu Yuchen had been observing his expression and saw that he calmed down. Relieved, he quickly pulled him close and explained the situation in detail.

“Baby, do you know what this ‘gas’ is?”

Yan Ge explained in simple language the nature, dangers, and uses of methane, as well as inquired about the military department’s process of making the explosive bottles. He then made some modifications based on

his chemical knowledge and wrote it down on paper to hand it to Huangfu Yuchen.

“I’ll have someone inform the military department right away.”

Huangfu Yuchen passed on the instructions and returned to sit beside Yan Ge.

Yan Ge had already planned to produce gunpowder, but due to many other matters, he had not yet gotten to it. He never imagined that Huangfu Yuchen would discover methane before him and even make rudimentary gas bombs. This person’s mind was truly unfathomable. Yan Ge looked at him, and took the opportunity to ruffle his hair playfully.

As long as his beloved wasn’t angry, everything was fine. Huangfu Yuchen allowed him to mess with his head, and Yan Ge lowered his head to kiss his lips.

Yan Ge then stood up and said, “I’m tired after today. For the next ten days, I’ll live at Luoxue Palace.”

Huangfu Yuchen sighed helplessly. Alright, he would climb through the window at night.

The next day, all the monarchs came to bid farewell to Huangfu Yuchen, as expected. With Yan Ge still punishing him, he wasn’t in the mood to engage in political maneuverings. After exchanging a few polite words, he had his attendants see them off. He believed that for at least the next year, no kingdom would dare to provoke them easily.

—“Ding. Side Mission – Develop the capital into a famous city, is complete. Reward: 2 million taels of silver and one gold chest. Would you like to open the gold chest now?”

‘2 million taels of silver!’

Yan Ge who was in Luoxue Palace laughed and immediately opened the gold chest. The gold chest was special, so the rewards inside must be better

than those from the silver chest. What could it be?

–“Congratulations, you’ve obtained the ‘Heavenly Demon Annihilation Technique.’”

“Heavenly Demon Annihilation Technique?” Yan Ge looked at it. “So it’s a cultivation technique! Although it’s far inferior to the ‘Fengyun Immortal Records,’ it’s still an excellent cultivation technique. Great stuff!”

However, he needed to figure out how to make the best use of this technique. He decided he’ll take time to carefully study it, so he put it away in his backpack for now.

—“Ding. Side Mission – Develop Great Han into a world-renowned powerful nation. Mission time: five years. Mission Rewards upon success: Ten thousand taels of gold, one gold chest. Punishment upon failure: deduction of 100,000 taels of gold. Do you accept the mission? Yes or no?”

Yan Ge was thrilled. This time, the mission reward was gold! Of course, he accepted it!

It had been a busy day, and his mood fluctuated a lot. After the excitement, Yan Ge felt a little tired.

Huangfu Yuchen had been trying to communicating with him using his spiritual sense, but he pretended not to notice and fell asleep with his head covered. In his sleep, his lips involuntarily curled up. After an unknown amount of time, a familiar presence enveloped him…

One year later, on the cement road leading to the capital.

Dozens of specially-made large carriage boxes were pulled by several horses, clattering along the official road. The carriages had open tops, and their contents were piled high and covered with black cloth, concealing what was inside.

At the head of the caravan were two young men riding tall horses. They bore a striking resemblance, their skin slightly tanned.

These two men were none other than Gao Feng and Gao Yun, who had left the capital over a year ago. One had gone to the southwest, and the other to the south, but they unexpectedly met in Youcheng, so they had traveled together.

The two brothers chatted and laughed.

“We’re almost in the capital. After leaving Boss’s side for a year, I really missed him,” Gao Yun said.

“Yeah,” Gao Feng also smiled, “It feels more interesting to be with the boss.”

“True, but this year away has been rewarding. We can now report to the boss and His Majesty successfully,” Gao Yun said.

“Our kingdom has changed a lot in this year. I heard that sixty percent of cities and counties in the entire kingdom now have cement roads,” Gao Feng said, “If not for these cement roads, we wouldn’t have been able to return to the capital so quickly.”

A carriage driver couldn’t help but interject, “That’s right, it’s all thanks to our benevolent emperor and our considerate Yan Guiqing!”

That’s right, Yan Ge had now been promoted to Guiqing.

“Yes, as citizens of Great Han, we are happy. I heard that these cement roads are unique to our kingdom!” Gao Feng, Gao Yun, and the other imperial guards traveling with them all exchanged knowing smiles.

In the capital, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were both on vacation, keeping watch on children in the garden of the First Company. Lady Wen had gone back to her family to visit her sick mother, and Madam Yan had to go pray, so she entrusted the one-year-and three-month-old Yan Xiangtian, to Yan Ge.

Although Yang Zhuo still hadn’t regained his memories, he fell in love with Deng Mama again, and they remarried last year. Now they had a six-month-

old daughter, a precious little girl who was chubby and adorable, bringing endless joy to everyone.

With Yan Jin and the Little Crown Prince, there were now four children in the courtyard, and Yan Xiangtian looked longingly at Yan Jin and the Little Crown Prince, wanting to play with them. However, Yan Jin and the Little Crown Prince were much older, and they couldn't communicate well with Yan Xiangtian. After playing for a while, the three of them would end up fighting. Additionally, Little Miss Yang would occasionally cry, making the garden incredibly… lively and noisy.

Yan Ge's head ached from the noise, so he handed Yan Xiangtian over to Huangfu Yuchen and leisurely laid back on a nearby recliner, eating a peach.

Even though Yan Xiangtian felt upset about being teased and rejected by Yan Jin and the Little Crown Prince, he didn't cry. He stood there silently, a pitiful and funny sight to behold.

"This kid is quite interesting," Huangfu Yuchen said with a smile.

Yan Ge was satisfied, "He takes a lot from me."

Huangfu Yuchen effortlessly lifted Yan Xiangtian by his collar with one hand, "Baby, guess if he'll cry."

Yan Ge warned, "Don't make him cry, if he does, you'll have to comfort him."

"Kid, are you scared?" Huangfu Yuchen raised his arm and tossed Yan Xiangtian a little higher.

Yan Ge looked at Huangfu Yuchen's playful behavior helplessly. He recalled a video he had seen before called "Never Let Men Take Care of Children."

Huangfu Yuchen put one palm under Yan Xiangtian's back, held him with the other hand, and tossed him up again.

Yan Xiangtian turned 360 degrees in the air and landed back in Huangfu Yuchen's palm, but this time with his back facing the ground and his face down. The little one seemed startled, tightly clutching Huangfu Yuchen's hand. After seeing the scene below, he blinked his eyes and wailed in fear.

Yan Ge glared at Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen was startled by Yan Xiangtian's loud cry. He held the little one gently by the armpits and placed him on Yan Ge's chest, saying innocently, "Maybe he's hungry."

Yan Jin and the Little Crown Prince both looked at him in accusation.

"Hmm?" Huangfu Yuchen's expression turned solemn, and he raised an eyebrow.

Yan Jin and the Little Crown Prince quickly looked away.

"Alright, Tiantian, a man should not shed tears," Yan Ge held Yan Xiangtian in his arms, walked up to Huangfu Yuchen, and used the little fist to hit Huangfu Yuchen's shoulder. "Watch our Shadowless Fist!"

Yan Xiangtian smiled with tears still hanging from his eyelashes. He glanced at Huangfu Yuchen and stretched out his little arms toward him. "Again."

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen: "…"

"Was he scared and cried because he wasn't prepared earlier?" Yan Jin burst into laughter.

The maids and servants on the side also chuckled softly.

At this moment, Deng Mande ran over with a joyous expression. "Your Majesty, Yan Guiqing, Guard Feng and Guard Yun have returned!"

"Good!" Huangfu Yuchen smiled, "They were in Youcheng a few days ago, didn't expect them to arrive so quickly."

Thinking about the miraculous Maifan stone, Yan Ge became excited. “Finally! Where are they now?”

“They’ve arrived at the west city gate, Yan Guiqing,” Deng Mande said, “There are more than a dozen carriages in total.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Send someone to meet them and have them deliver the goods directly to the palace.”

“Yes.” Deng Mande responded, “Your Majesty, there’s more good news. General Jun and General Lu have also sent messages. They have successfully found the goods. General Jun will probably arrive in another three or four days, and General Lu will likely arrive in ten days.”

Huangfu Yuchen was overjoyed, “Excellent! All those who went on the mission will be heavily rewarded!”

“Come on, let’s go back.” Yan Ge couldn’t wait and handed Yan Xiangtian to Yan Jin.

“Eh? I don’t know how to take care of children.” Yan Jing handed Yan Xiangtian to Qiu Xiang, then pulled the Little Crown Prince and quickly ran away.

Yan Xiangtian’s gaze followed Yan Ge and the others as he was held in Qiu Xiang’s arms. He blinked, blinked again, probably wondering: why didn’t anyone take me along?

Back at the Tenglong Palace, Yan Ge couldn’t stay still. At times, he was excited about the Maifan stone that would greatly increase food production, and at other times, he worried about what to do if the stones found by Gao Feng and the others weren’t the Maifan stone. He scratched his head in frustration.

Huangfu Yuchen simply pulled him into his arms, kissed him deeply, while his hands roamed around…

After a while, when their intimacy subsided, Yan Ge calmed down and thought things through. Even if they didn’t find Maifan stone this time, it didn’t matter. They could send another group to search.

Huangfu Yuchen caressed Yan Ge’s face and said to the people outside the door, “Come in.”

Yan Jin and the Little Crown Prince walked in.

“Greetings, Father Emperor.”

“Hmm.” Huangfu Yuchen, as a father, still maintained his dignity.

“Second Master, is the Maifan stone really as miraculous as you said?” The Little Crown Prince sat beside Yan Ge, asking curiously.

Yan Ge nodded, “You’ll find out soon. When the time comes, we’ll choose some suitable stones and have them made into mechanism cups. Drinking water from cups made of the Maifan stone is beneficial to one’s health.”

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Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, and a few others sat in the hall for about two to three quarters of an hour when a palace attendant rushed in to report, “Announcement to Your Majesty, Guards Gao Feng and Gao Yun are outside the hall and request an audience.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Let them in.”

“Yes.”

After a moment, Gao Feng and Gao Yun strode in and knelt heavily on the steps, indicating their excitement. “We pay our respects to Your Majesty, long live Your Majesty! Respectful greetings to Yan Guiqing!”

“Rise.” Huangfu Yuchen raised his hand.

“Thank you, Your Majesty!”

Yan Ge looked at Gao Feng and Gao Yun, then smiled and teased them, “It’s over, Master Gao and Madam Gao will want to scold me. You both have gotten so tanned, how are you going to propose marriage like this?”

Gao Feng and Gao Yun smiled with embarrassment.

“You’re exaggerating, Yan Guiqing.”

Huangfu Yuchen asked, “You’ve been gone for over a year, you’ve worked hard. What are your findings?”

Gao Feng said, “For Your Majesty and the Kingdom, we were willing and didn’t dare to complain. We were fortunate enough to find large areas of Maifan in the rivers and mountains in the south and southwest. However,

due to limited manpower, transporting these stones on a large scale to the capital would undoubtedly attract attention. Secondly, we were eager to report the news to Your Majesty, so we only brought back a dozen or so carriages of the Maifan stone."

Huangfu Yuchen looked at them with admiration and nodded. "You've thought it through well and haven't disappointed me. Come, have a seat."

"Thank you, Your Majesty!"

After they sat down, Yan Ge asked, "Tell us in detail how you found the Maifan stone."

Gao Feng began, "It goes like this. When we first arrived in the south, we followed Yan Guiqing's instructions and asked the locals in each town if there had been any volcanic eruptions in the area. Initially, we asked anyone we saw, but later, we realized we should ask the elderly, who might know about such things. So, we focused on asking the elderly. At first, we only found some scattered stones, and it was only over two months ago when we dug up a large area of Maifan stones at the foot of a mountain near a river."

Huangfu Yuchen asked, "Did you record the locations of all the Maifan stones you found?"

Gao Feng said, "We wrote them all down on paper."

As he spoke, he took out a short flute from his pocket and broke it, revealing a small rolled-up piece of paper.

Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge both nodded in satisfaction. Gao Feng was very meticulous; even during such a long and tiring journey, he maintained his vigilance.

Gao Feng handed the paper scroll to Deng Mande, who passed it to Huangfu Yuchen.

"Gao Yun, how about your side?" Yan Ge asked.

Gao Yun replied, “Regarding Yan Guiqing’s inquiry, my situation was similar to Gao Feng’s. However, the southwestern region is more mountainous, so the search process was more complicated. It was over four months ago when we found a large area of Maifan stone distribution, but on the way back, we encountered a group of bandits. We attacked the small bandit stronghold, and that’s why we were delayed.”

Then he handed over the locations he recorded to Deng Mande as well. The two brothers were quite interesting – Gao Feng hid the paper inside the broken flute, and Gao Yun concealed it in his hairpin. They were both very cautious.

“Did any of the teams suffer casualties?” Huangfu Yuchen asked.

Gao Feng replied, “There were no casualties in my team.”

Gao Yun said with remorse, “After we entered the deep forest, one soldier in my team was bitten by a venomous snake and died. Please forgive me, Your Majesty!”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “There’s no need to blame yourself. It was an unexpected situation, and it wasn’t something you desired. Deng Mande, issue an order to give the family of that soldier 500 taels of silver as compensation.”

“Yes.”

“On behalf of that brother, thank you, Your Majesty!” Gao Yun stood up and knelt down.

“Rise.”

Yan Ge said, “Yuchen, let’s go and see the Maifan stone now.”

“Alright, let’s go.”

Everyone arrived at the heavily guarded Wuying Hall, and the carriages loaded with Maifan stones were parked here.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun felt somewhat nervous; if what they found was not Maifan stone, His Majesty and Yan Guiqing would be disappointed.

Deng Mande stepped forward and uncovered the black cloth on the carriages.

Yan Ge had seen many Maifan stones before and was now sure after seeing the stones inside the carriage. “Yes, these are Maifan stones.”

“Are you certain?” Huangfu Yuchen asked.

“Certain.” Yan Ge smiled, picking up a smaller stone. “See the many small holes on it? And these white spots look like grains of rice. It is undoubtedly Maifan stone.”

Gao Yun said, “When we first found stones that looked like the Maifan stone you described, we didn’t dare to be presumptuous. We had to test it with water mixed with ink. But later, after finding more, we gained experience, and we could tell whether it was Maifan stone at a glance.”

Yan Ge asked Deng Mande to uncover the other carriages, and after a quick look at the stones stacked on top, he was basically certain that they were all Maifan stones.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Good! Gao Feng, Gao Yun, you’ve made significant contributions. Each of you will be rewarded with a thousand taels of silver, and the other soldiers in your teams will be rewarded with two hundred taels of silver each!”

Gao Feng and Gao Yun were already quite well off, and now they received another thousand taels of silver each. They thanked gratefully.

Yan Jin and the Little Crown Prince had already started selecting the more aesthetically pleasing stones on the side, preparing to have them made into tea sets.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “You two have been away from the capital for over a year, and Master Gao and Madam Gao must be very concerned. Go offer

greetings.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty!”

Huangfu Yuchen asked Yan Ge, “Xiao Ge, do you have any other instructions?”

Yan Ge laughed, “I’ll give you both a month off to rest properly after you return.”

“Thank you, Yan Guiqing!”

Gao Feng and Gao Yun walked out of the hall. Unintentionally, they both stretched their arms, letting out a yawn. For the first time in over a year, they felt an unprecedented sense of relaxation.

“Let’s go home, take a bath and have a good sleep!” Gao Yun said.

When they returned to the Gao residence, the servants who had also received the news were waiting anxiously at the door. When they saw the two familiar figures approaching on horseback, they were incredibly excited.

“Quick, go and tell the master and madam that the young master and second young master are back!”

The two brothers entered the residence and first paid their respects to their father in the main hall.

Gao Jingwei and Madam Gao had eager expressions, their eyes fixed on the door. In a short while, they saw the two young men walking in together and kneeling in front of them, giving a solid kowtow.

“Father, Mother.”

“Good, good. My good boys. Get up quickly, get up quickly.” Madam Gao said while wiping her tears, “Let Mother have a good look.”

Gao Feng and Gao Yun stood up and walked in front of Madam Gao.

“It’s good that you’re back, it’s good that you’re back.”

Gao Jingwei looked at his two sons with satisfaction. “Everything went well, right?” The matter of the Maifan stone was kept a secret, and even he didn’t know the details, only that his two sons had received a secret decree from the Emperor and went on a trip.

Gao Yun hurriedly said, “Very smoothly. As soon as we entered the palace, we reported to the Emperor, and he rewarded each of us with a thousand taels of silver.”

“Oh,” Gao Jingwei listened and roughly guessed. Needing to be on a trip for a whole year indicated it was an extremely important matter. However, the Emperor only rewarded them with silver without any other official recognition, which meant the details of the mission were confidential. He didn’t ask about it and only inquired how they had spent the past year.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun answered one by one.

After learning all the details, Madam Gao suddenly said, “Feng’er, Yun’er, both of you are not young anymore. This time, the Emperor and Yan Guiqing have granted you a month off. It’s a perfect opportunity to handle your marriage affairs.”

“What?!” Gao Feng and Gao Yun looked at each other in surprise.

Gao Jingwei nodded, “Your mother is right. Feng’er, you are already twenty-three, and Yun’er, you are twenty-one. Even the children of our colleagues’ friends are getting married by now.”

“Father, Mother, this is too sudden,” Gao Yun hesitated. “One month is too short to both propose and get married. Isn’t it too rushed?”

Gao Feng also said, “Yes, Father, Mother, we are still young. It’s a good time to serve by the Emperor’s and Yan Guiqing’s side. Let’s talk about marriage later.”

A faint smile appeared on Madam Gao's face. "Who told you that getting married means you can't serve by the Emperor's and Yan Guiqing's side?"

Gao Feng was at a loss for words.

Gao Yun pulled Gao Feng along and said, "Father, Mother, we are very tired from just returning. Let's rest first, and we can discuss this later."

"Stop!" Gao Jingwei put down his teacup and spoke sternly.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun had to stop.

"Father, do you have any other instructions?"

Gao Jingwei said slowly, "According to the Emperor's intention, there may be major movements from him and Yan Guiqing in the near future. At that time, you may be called upon to join them. If you don't mind that our arrangements for your marriage may clash with that time, you can go."

Gao Feng asked curiously, "Father, what kind of major movements?"

Gao Jingwei glanced at him and calmly sipped his tea.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun exchanged glances helplessly. As officials, their father was experienced while they were still inexperienced.

"We will get married, but the candidates must be agreed upon by both of us," Gao Feng said.

Madam Gao had a pleased expression. "Of course. I will invite the matchmaker right away."

After the two brothers left the main hall, they couldn't help but sigh again.

"Big brother, why haven't we encountered any thing like 'the hero rescues the beauty' or 'martial arts competitions to win the beauty' while in the outside world during this past year?" Gao Yun said.

Gao Feng also regretted, “If only we had chosen someone during the Hundred Flowers Festival.”

“Forget it,” Gao Yun said, “We can only hope for Mother’s discerning eye.”

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“Summon the Ministers of the Ministry of Public Works and the Ministry of War to the Imperial Study.”

“Yes.”

“Xiao Ge, I will first go to the study to handle the Maifan stone matter.” Huangfu Yuchen gave a brief instruction and proceeded to the study.

Gao Jingwei and Luo Wei were summoned by the Emperor in haste. As they met on the way, they greeted each other respectfully.

“Master Gao, do you know why the Emperor summoned the two of us?” Luo Wei asked.

Gao Jingwei shook his head. “The Emperor’s intentions are hard to predict. It might be about hydraulic engineering or military equipment.”

Luo Wei inwardly cursed the old fox, Gao Jingwei’s response was equivalent to saying nothing.

The two arrived at the door of the Imperial Study and announced, “Minister of Public Works, Gao Jingwei, and Minister of War, Luo Wei, request an audience with the Emperor.”

After a while, a voice from inside said, “The Minister of Public Works and the Minister of War may have an audience.”

“We pay respects to the Emperor, long live the Emperor!”

“Rise.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Huangfu Yuchen got straight to the point, “I have an important and confidential mission for the two of you. Take a look at this.”

Deng Mande handed two pieces of paper to Gao Jingwei and Luo Wei.

On the paper, they saw the names of various cities, counties, and villages, along with detailed addresses, indicating directions such as east or west from the city.

“Do you see the stone on the table? I want you to immediately send people to these places to carefully survey the specific production and distribution of this type of ore. Instruct the local authorities to mine 50,000 catties of the ore and transport it to the capital. This matter is of great benefit to the development of our Great Han. The Ministry of Public Works and the Ministry of War must not only cooperate fully but also keep it a secret.”

“Yes!”

Huangfu Yuchen continued, “The mining operation will inevitably lead to the need for a large number of local laborers. Warn the local authorities that hiring laborers must be done officially with proper wages or providing three meals a day. We must not incite public resentment. Otherwise, if I find out, the punishment will range from dismissal and confiscation of property to public execution.”

“Yes.”

“Furthermore, to prevent some officials from presuming my intentions and secretly hoarding the ore, strict supervision must be in place. Once any misconduct is found, there will be no leniency!”

Luo Wei said, “Your Majesty’s consideration is thorough, and this official admires it. Please rest assured; I will personally oversee this matter with the Minister of Public Works.”

Gao Jingwei added, “Since the implementation of Your Majesty’s ‘cyclical inspection and supervision policy,’ upright officials are rewarded, and corrupt officials are investigated and punished. The officials serve the people with joy, and the governance is fair. I believe that no one dares to abuse their power or slack off.”

The ‘cyclical Inspection and supervision policy’ referred to the practice where the Emperor dispatched two separate groups of officials at different times and locations to secretly inspect the conduct of local officials. The members of the two groups did not know each other’s identities. If the latter group of officials did not discover any illegal activities, such as concealing information, colluding with local officials, or accepting bribes, committed by the first group of officials, then it was good. However, if they found any wrongdoing, severe punishment awaited.

Huangfu Yuchen had increased officials’ salaries, so the officials of Great Han were happy and served the country and the Emperor with greater dedication. Later, with the introduction of the cyclical inspection and supervision policy, people began to self-examine and self-regulate. Overall, it indeed led to a more clean and just governance. However, there were still some daring and greedy individuals, which was why Huangfu Yuchen emphasized this point.

“Immediately send people to handle this matter.”

“Yes!”

The Maifan stone that had been transported to the capital was sent to the Agricultural Experiment Department in secret, and the head of the department was informed about the usage of Maifan stone.

Maifan stone was an effective and natural soil improver that stabilized, enhanced, and balanced soil physical functions. It not only benefited crops but also greatly improved the growth of poultry and livestock, enhancing meat and egg quality and strengthening their disease resistance. Currently, the Maifan stone was only enough to supply the needs of the Agricultural Experiment Department and the Imperial Vegetable and Poultry Farm. In time, Yan Ge would gradually promote the use of the Maifan stone

throughout the capital, then to major cities in the kingdom, and finally to counties and towns nationwide, expanding its usage step by step until it reached the whole nation.

By then, the national grain production would significantly increase, ensuring self-sufficiency, meeting wartime needs, and even allowing for export to foreign kingdoms.

However, all of this required time.

Yan Ge had been busy for nearly a month, and the good news of Gao Feng and Gao Yun's simultaneous marriage spread throughout the streets. Besides his identity as the boss of the First Company, he was also an imperial consort. Attending the weddings of subordinates would go against the palace rules and might affect the political situation, so he didn't personally go to the Gao family. Instead, he sent trusted attendants and a generous gift. Even so, this honor was enough to make other officials envy.

In the blink of an eye, it was July.

As usual, Yan Ge disguised himself and toured all the industries under the First Company's name. Such inspections occurred approximately every two to three months. Due to the imperial authority, very few people in the company dared to be lazy or deceitful. If anyone was found, they would be promptly dismissed, and all shops with the 'Nanyi' mark would no longer hire them. Thanks to this, the company's management was smooth.

After Yan Ge finished the inspection, he met with several key members, including Wen Xian, Wei Jushen, and Zhao Cheng.

Wen Xian smiled, "Every time Boss Yan inspects, he uses a different appearance and attire. I heard he caught three employees making mistakes on three different occasions. I'm afraid your employees are already on edge due to your surprise inspections."

Yan Ge responded casually, "Those with a clear conscience need not fear knocking on a ghost's door. If they haven't done anything wrong, why should they be afraid of my inspection?"

“That’s true,” Wen Xian nodded, smiling.

Wei Jushen said, “Boss Yan’s inspections not only identify those who behave improperly but also reward those who are diligent and reliable. There are rewards and punishments, which is fair.”

The group settled in a private room at Liuxian Pavilion, and Wen Xian said, “I’m getting married in a month. Boss Yan, if you’re available, I hope you can grace us with your presence at the wedding.”

“To Jushen?” Yan Ge glanced playfully at him and Wei Jushen. He had long noticed that something was brewing between the two, but he didn’t expect it to take so long to bear fruit.

Wei Jushen replied, “Actually, we had planned to get married long ago, but we’ve been too busy. Now, we finally have some free time. We’ve discussed it and decided to adopt a child from Brother Wen’s eldest brother after the wedding.”

It could be seen that Wei Jushen was in a cheerful mood, he even revealed their private plans.

Yan Ge smiled, “Congratulations! Congratulations! I’ll treat you all today. If I’m free on that day, I will definitely come to congratulate you.” He was genuinely happy for Wen Xian and Wei Jushen’s engagement. In private, both were his trusted friends, and he genuinely wished them happiness. On a public level, Wei Jushen was his confidant, while Wen Xian was a prominent merchant in the capital. Their union would strengthen the ties between the First Company and the Wen family. In the future, if there were any financial or labor needs from the Wen family, it would be easier to negotiate with someone close.

After returning to the palace, Yan Ge took Wan Xiang and Xiao Chuanzi to the treasure room to pick out congratulatory gifts for Wei Jushen and Wen Xian.

When Huangfu Yuchen returned from the morning court, he saw Yan Ge rummaging in the treasure room.

“Xiao Ge, what are you looking for?”

“You’re back. Wei Jushen and Wen Xian are getting married, so I’m looking for suitable congratulatory gifts.” Yan Ge didn’t even turn his head and picked up a jade carving to examine. “This ‘Moonlight Over the Vast Sea’ is not bad, but the symbolism may not be quite appropriate…”

“Are both of them getting married to someone else, or are they marrying each other?” Huangfu Yuchen walked over to his side and casually asked.

“They are marrying each other,” Yan Ge replied.

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled, “Then you’ve saved one congratulatory gift.”

Yan Ge also smiled.

“When is the wedding?”

“In a month.”

“Oh. Then you might not be able to attend.” Huangfu Yuchen glanced at the tea table nearby, and the clever Deng Mande quickly walked over and poured a cup of iced tea, offering it to them.

“Why not?” Yan Ge turned back in confusion.

Huangfu Yuchen said nonchalantly, “In a few days, a special forces unit is going on a mission to the northwest. I was planning to take you with me. However, if you don’t want to go, you can stay.”

Yan Ge was overjoyed and clasped his shoulders with both hands, “I’ll go, of course I’ll go! As for the congratulatory gifts for Wei Jushen and Wen Xian, we can send them through someone else.”

As soon as he heard that he could ‘travel’ again, his eyes sparkled with excitement. Huangfu Yuchen loved seeing him with this expression, and a charming smile curved his lips as he pulled him into an embrace.

The eunuchs and palace maids voluntarily withdrew from the treasure room, closing the door behind them.

“I knew you would be interested.” Huangfu Yuchen lightly scraped Yan Ge’s cheek with his thumb and chuckled.

“I’ve wanted to experience the life of a soldier in the military camp a long time ago, but I never had the time. Now, I have an even better opportunity.” Yan Ge grinned, leaning in to kiss him on the lips with a loud ‘mwah,’ “Are all the political arrangements in place?”

“Otherwise, what do you think I’ve been busy with, shuttling between the Study and Tenglong palace?” Huangfu Yuchen embraced Yan Ge and sat down, affectionately rubbing their hands together with a satisfied sigh, “Baby, I’ve missed you. It feels like it’s been a long time since I held you properly…”

Yan Ge tilted his head back and kissed him.

Huangfu Yuchen wrapped his hands around Yan Ge, as if afraid he might escape, and deeply pressed his lips against Yan Ge’s, passionately sucking…

The next day, Yan Ge informed his family at the Yan Mansion about his upcoming trip to the northwest, but he didn’t mention the special forces mission. His family only thought the Emperor was planning another incognito tour.

“Going to the northwest? Isn’t that where Xiguan Pass is?” Madam Yan’s face lit up, “Can you check on your eldest brother while you’re there?”

“That’s my plan.” Yan Ge smiled, “Mom, Dad, don’t worry. I will make time to visit Xiguan Pass.”

“That’s good.” Madam Yan was somewhat excited, “Your eldest brother has been away for over two years. He always says everything is fine in his letters, but I can’t be at ease. If you can personally see him this time, I’ll be reassured.”

Yan Xiaojing looked at Yan Ge helplessly, “You’re going to the northwest, and the northwest isn’t just Xiguan Pass. Did you tell the Emperor about your visit to Xiguan Pass?”

“I did.” Yan Ge looked at his father with a helpless gaze, “Father, why don’t you trust me?”

Yan Xiaojing snorted heavily, “That’s because you always do things that make me uneasy!”

Madam Yan chuckled, “Alright, old master. Yan Ge’s actions are the most secure, especially with the Emperor’s care. What’s there to worry about?”

Lady Wen, who was holding Yan Xiangtian, sat restlessly, wanting to speak but hesitated.

Madam Yan asked curiously, “Daughter-in-law, do you have something to say?”

“Brother-in-law…” Lady Wen hesitated, glancing at Yan Ge.

Yan Ge was puzzled, “Sister-in-law, we’re all family. Just speak your mind.”

After hesitating for a moment, Lady Wen finally made up her mind. She stood up and paid her respects, “Brother in law, I do have an awkward request.”

“Please, sister-in-law, go ahead and tell me.”

Lady Wen bit her lip, her head lowered even more, her voice softer, “If it’s convenient for Brother in law, I would like to trouble you to take Tiantian to see his father when you go to Xiguan Pass.”

Yan Ge, Yan Xiaojing, and Madam Yan were all stunned, but after a moment’s thought, they didn’t find it surprising. As Yan Xiaojing’s wife, it was only natural for Lady Wen to worry about him and want her husband to meet his son.

However, Yan Xiaojing quickly refused, “No. The Emperor’s tour and leisure are just a pretext; there must be official business involved. How can they take a child who is not even two years old?”

Lady Wen suddenly knelt down, “Father-in-law, Tiantian is very well-behaved, and he has always been close to Brother In law. I believe he won’t cause any trouble for the Emperor and Brother in law.”

Madam Yan was also moved, “Old master, I think our daughter-in-law’s idea is good.” Serving at the border is dangerous. Letting Yan Su see his son and having a constant reminder of his family waiting for him in the capital might keep him safe.

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“I said it’s not allowed, and it’s not allowed. How can official and personal matters be mixed?” Yan Xiaojing frowned.

Lady Wen spoke softly but resolutely, “Master, how can your daughter-in-law bear to let Tiantian leave her side? But just like my mother-in-law, I also worry about my husband. That’s why I asked Brother in law to take Tiantian to the northwest, hoping that my husband will always remember he has his family no matter what he encounters. With the Emperor on the tour, he will surely bring skilled guards, so we don’t need to worry about Tiantian’s safety. Moreover, Tiantian is easy to handle and is close to Brother in law. He won’t cause any trouble for the Emperor and Brother in law.”

“That’s right, Master.” Madam Yan nodded repeatedly, “I think it’s a good idea.”

Yan Xiaojing still frowned, “That’s from a woman’s perspective!”

Yan Ge interjected, “Father, Mother, Sister-in-law, there’s no inconvenience for Yuchen and me. If you all feel at ease, then I’ll take Tiantian with us.”

Madam Yan and Lady Wen were overjoyed.

Yan Xiaojing also thought Lady Wen’s reasoning made sense, as a father, he was also concerned about Yan Su but he didn’t want to inconvenience the Emperor. But since Yan Ge said there’s no problem, he didn’t oppose further.

Tiantian may be young, but he was in good health, and there was no need to worry about him enduring a long journey. So, the decision was settled.

Huangfu Yuchen learned about this matter and had no objections. Can he oppose the decision of his beloved's family? It was just a matter of arranging additional manpower. When Yan Ge and he were unavailable, they could take care of Yan Xiangtian on their behalf.

Five days later, Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, Gao Feng, and Gao Yun dressed in special forces attire and headed to the west gate of the city to meet with other members of the special forces.

The special forces wore camouflage uniform. Yan Ge was already handsome, and wearing the camouflage uniform made him even more heroic and charismatic. Huangfu Yuchen could hardly take his eyes off him.

Huangfu Yuchen, on the other hand, was also imposing in his camouflage attire. His cold and majestic aura was now mixed with determination and ruggedness, making him extremely charming. Yan Ge stared at him for a long time, feeling more satisfied the more he looked.

On this journey, they attracted attention wherever they went.

The idea of the special forces was, of course, Yan Ge's. The members of the special forces were carefully selected from soldiers all over the Kingdom, and their training methods were almost the same as those of the modern special forces that Yan Ge knew, if not more rigorous.

This time, there were a total of twenty people heading to the northwest to carry out their mission, all carefully chosen experts. Yan Ge and his companions were added later, but even with their impressive backgrounds, they couldn't take up the spots of other soldiers. So, the total number of this team was twenty-four.

The captain, Wei Hao, had encountered Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen before. However, they were in disguise and it had been quite some time, so Wei Hao didn't recognize them.

Traveling together with their cavalry was another group, apparently heading to the northwest to visit relatives. This group seemed to have official

background, and before departing, Wei Hao received orders to take care of this group along the way.

It was evident that the other team was the one arranged by Huangfu Yuchen to take care of Yan Xiangtian. The convoy consisted of a total of eight people, including Yan Jin, Yan Xiangtian, Yan Jin's wet nurse, Auntie Zhai, the maid Qing Xue, and four skilled guards. Except for Yan Xiangtian and Auntie Zhai, the other six were all skilled experts. This arrangement provided better security for Yan Xiangtian's safety.

The two teams continued their rapid pace, stopping only for a nearly half-hour lunch break. They hardly paused until the sun began to set. Wei Hao finally halted the horses and glanced back at the forest.

"Halt—"

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen also signaled for Bai Guan and Yunyi(their horses) to stop.

"It's getting late. We will camp here for the night and continue our journey early tomorrow morning," Wei Hao said.

"Yes!"

Twenty special forces soldiers dismounted without leaving any traces and observed Yan Ge and the others. They couldn't detect any signs of fatigue on their faces and were somewhat surprised. These four people managed to join their team through the backdoor, and unexpectedly, two of them possessed genuine skills.

To avoid attracting attention, the two teams kept a distance between them but maintained visual contact with each other.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen found a place to sit down casually, with Gao Feng and Gao Yun naturally staying by their side.

Wei Hao's group also sat down, resting and taking out the food they carried with them. Though the weather was hot, the fruits and cakes they brought

from the capital were still fresh enough, thanks to the short journey. In the future, if they couldn't find a town, they'd have to eat dry rations or hunt for food. Dry rations were simply dehydrated food, such as dried steam bums, bread, or biscuits, which could be preserved for a long time and were easy to carry. They'd chew on them dry or soak them in water before eating.

Based solely on their seating positions, Yan Ge noticed that his group of four of was somewhat excluded. This exclusion wasn't necessarily intentional but rather an unconscious and natural reaction from the others towards outsiders.

He glanced at Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen was a reserved person. As long as Yan Ge cared for him, that was enough for him, and he didn't care much about others. He was sipping water with indifference.

Yan Ge leaned close to his ear and said seriously, "If you were born in an ordinary family and had to study or work with others, your social skills would definitely be poor."

Huangfu Yuchen shrugged, "It doesn't matter. As long as your social skills are good."

Yan Ge shook his head and took out a fragrant egg pancake from his bag, then walked over to Wei Hao.

The other special forces members looked up at him.

"Captain, brothers. This is a scallion and egg pancake prepared for me by my family. If you don't mind, feel free to try some." Yan Ge said with a smile.

Wei Hao took the pancake, somewhat surprised, "This egg pancake seems to have a faint cold aura."

Yan Ge said, "The weather is too hot. I'm afraid the egg pancake might spoil, so I brought some ice with me."

“I see.”

Wei Hao distributed the egg pancakes to the others, and they all took a bite. The pancakes were soft and flavorful.

“Did you notice? There seems to be a hint of chicken flavor in this egg pancake.” One of the special forces members said to another.

“Yes, it’s true. It’s quite delicious.”

As the saying goes, a soft mouth and a hard heart. The atmosphere became slightly more relaxed.

A tall and sturdy special forces member asked Yan Ge, “The four of you seem to know each other. Are you from the same place?”

Yan Ge replied, “Yes, we were all in the same military camp before. I’m Qin Xiaosa, he’s Yu Xiaoyao, and the other two are Liu Tian and Liu Di. How should I address you, Big Brother?”

“Meng Gang.”

Yan Ge greeted him with a salute, “So you’re Big Brother Meng. Please take care of us on this journey.”

“No problem.” Meng Gang was also straightforward.

Yan Ge smiled at everyone and returned to Huangfu Yuchen’s side.

Huangfu Yuchen handed him a water pouch and an egg pancake, “Eat up.”

“Okay.” Yan Ge secretly used his spiritual sense to check on Yan Xiangtian inside the carriage. Although he was separated from his mother, with his familiar nursemaid by his side, the little guy seemed to be adapting well and was sleeping soundly in her arms.

They would have to eat dry rations from tomorrow onwards.

Yan Ge suddenly thought of compressed biscuits, and both of his eyes curved into a smile.

“What are you thinking about again?” Huangfu Yuchen found it amusing.

“It’s a secret.” Yan Ge smirked.

Huangfu Yuchen touched the back of his neck.

Seeing the intimate gesture between the two, the other special forces members realized their relationship and their impression of the two worsened a bit. They were here for a mission in the northwest, not for romantic affairs. Even if they were in a relationship, they should be more restrained.

Yan Ge pushed Huangfu Yuchen’s hand away, signaling him to look at the others.

Huangfu Yuchen could only shake his head helplessly.

“We caught a deer!” Gao Feng and Gao Yun came out of the woods with excitement. Gao Feng was carrying a deer weighing about thirty to forty kilograms, while Gao Yun had a bundle of firewood. Although their masters seemed uninterested in food, as their subordinates, they couldn’t just watch the two masters eat dry rations. So, after getting Wei Hao’s permission, they looked around and managed to hunt something.

The two didn’t know how to address Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen appropriately, so they refrained from using any titles.

“It’s quite big,” Yan Ge walked over, “I happen to have some seasonings. Xiao Yao, you come and roast it.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, looking at the pile of firewood, and said to Gao Feng and Gao Yun, “The deer is too big; this wood is not enough. Go and collect some more.”

“We’ll do that right away.” Gao Feng and Gao Yun were eager to taste Huangfu Yuchen’s cooking skills, so they quickly went to collect more

firewood.

Yan Ge took out the seasonings and handed them to Huangfu Yuchen, but suddenly, his legs were wrapped in a small force. He looked down and saw it was Yan Xiangtian.

Yan Xiangtian's maid, Qing Xue, was following closely behind.

Yan Ge smiled and lifted Yan Xiangtian. He was a bit surprised. He had changed his appearance, so could it be that the little guy still recognized him by his scent?

Yan Xiangtian glanced at him but didn't make a sound, curiously watching the ignited bonfire.

"Little brother!" Yan Jin took the opportunity to run over. He then smiled at Yan Ge.

"Want to eat." Yan Xiangtian pointed to the prey in Huangfu Yuchen's hand, his voice tender and adorable.

Yan Ge chuckled, "You only have a few teeth."

Yan Xiangtian grinned and opened his small mouth, "I have many."

Yan Ge put him down and handed him a piece of beef jerky.

Yan Xiangtian was easy to please, sitting obediently on the ground and happily biting the jerky. His chubby cheeks swelled as he chewed, and droplets of saliva occasionally dripped from the corners of his mouth.

Yan Ge and Yan Jin watched, laughing heartily beside him.

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After an arduous journey of over half a month, Yan Ge and the others finally arrived in the northwest.

Wei Hao turned back to the group and said, “Our destination is not far ahead. Everyone change into your regular clothes and hurry to the city before it gets dark.”

“Yes!”

Yan Ge and the other three intentionally or unintentionally stayed at the back of the group. For some unknown reason, they couldn’t quite integrate into the close-knit special forces team for some reason. They didn’t insist on it either, as long as they could participate in the mission; everything else was secondary.

With a mixture of fast and slow travel, they managed to reach the city before the gates were closed.

Once inside the city, Yan Jin’s group separated from the others and found an inn to stay. They planned to reunite after Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen completed their mission and head to the Xiguan Pass together.

The special forces team stayed in a different inn.

Wei Hao had booked the entire inn and said solemnly, “From now on, no one is allowed to go out alone. Stay in pairs and keep an eye on each other.”

To maintain secrecy, Yan Ge didn’t ask Huangfu Yuchen about the details of their mission. However, upon hearing Wei Hao’s instructions, he immediately understood that this mission must be of great importance.

“Meng Gang and Zhang Qiao will team up; Huang Hui and Jason will be a team…”

Yan Ge’s team was split into different groups.

Wei Hao continued, “I’ve instructed the innkeeper to prepare meals. Rest in your rooms for a while and gather here for dinner later.”

“Yes!”

After leaving Wei Hao’s room, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen exchanged glances and entered their respective rooms. This was the first time they had to sleep separately on a mission, and it felt a bit strange, but they quickly found it amusing. After all, it was just one night apart, right?

“You and that brother don’t seem like typical special forces soldiers,” Zhou Zheng who was lying on the opposite bed with his eyes closed suddenly spoke.

Yan Ge remained composed. “We made Brother Zhou laugh. We haven’t been in the military for long.”

“I see,” Zhou Zheng commented noncommittally, then added, “This mission is very dangerous. I hope you won’t hinder us when the time comes.”

Yan Ge didn’t mind his words. The four of them hadn’t trained together with the others, so it was understandable that they hadn’t seen their capabilities and were worried about that.

“Your observation and judgment skills still need improvement.”

“What do you mean?” Zhou Zheng abruptly opened his eyes, staring at the ceiling and waiting for his response.

Yan Ge said, “It’s just a casual remark, Brother Zhou. Don’t take them to heart.”

Then, a muffled and intermittent knocking sound came from the wall. Yan Ge couldn’t help but smile and knocked back a few times.

The knocking sound from the next room repeated.

Yan Ge chuckled and responded again.

Zhou Zheng looked at him suspiciously. “Are you communicating with them?”

“Yes, different knocking patterns represent different meanings,” Yan Ge explained briefly then stood up. “Let’s go. It’s time for dinner.”

They both walked out of the room, and as expected, others from different rooms also emerged, getting ready to gather in Wei Hao’s room.

Huangfu Yuchen stood at the doorway of the adjacent room, smiling at Yan Ge.

Zhou Zheng immediately understood that they were “communicating” earlier.

Meng Gang teased Yan Ge and Zhou Zheng, “I was about to call you both, and here you are. Could it be that you smelled the aroma of the food?”

“Yes. After traveling for more than ten days, we can finally sit down and have a proper meal. Of course, we want to hurry,” Yan Ge replied with a smile.

Zhou Zheng glanced at Yan Ge without saying anything.

Everyone entered Wei Hao’s room. Wei Hao asked Meng Gang to close the doors and windows and then said, “Perhaps you all know that the border between Great Han and the Mai Kingdom is very long, and not every border area has stationed troops. The garrisons guard the vulnerable border areas, while the relatively difficult-to-attack areas have no military presence. Dujiaping city is one such place. It borders the Mai Kingdom’s Zhuomudian City to the west. Recently, a group of one hundred cavalry bandits suddenly appeared in the Mai Kingdom. They frequently cross the

border, causing trouble in our border towns, committing murders, arson, and robberies. They always succeed and then disappear before our official troops arrive. General Cao at Xig Pass has confronted the Mai Kingdom garrison about this, but they gave excuses, claiming that these bandits also rob their villages and that they are helpless. It's truly infuriating!"

Upon hearing this, everyone was filled with indignation and anger.

Meng Gang had with a fiery temper and stood up abruptly, his voice full of rage. "Since they can't control their own people, we'll do it for them!"

"That's right!" The other special forces members echoed in agreement.

Wei Hao nodded, speaking in a cold tone, "Our mission this time is to eliminate this cavalry unit, and we must do it covertly, making the Mai Kingdom uncertain if it was the work of Great Han."

"Zhuomudian is like the heartland of Mai Kingdom's border regions. By annihilating these bandits in Zhuomudian, it's like stabbing them in the heart, severely crippling and intimidating them!"

Huang Huike said objectively, "They have a hundred men, and we have only twenty-four. We must have a suitable plan. If we confront them head-on, it's probably going to be difficult to retreat safely."

Wei Hao looked around at everyone. "It all depends on our strength. We are all elite soldiers selected from the special forces, and I want to see how strong we really are. I also want to hand in a satisfactory answer to our superiors. What about all of you?"

Everyone's morale soared as they replied in unison, "We're the same!"

Wei Hao said, "If we delay for one more day, the nearby civilians will suffer for another day. Let's all rest well tonight and assemble precisely at the hour of Yin tomorrow."

"Yes!"

Wei Hao added, "Let's eat."

Everyone picked up their bowls and started eating. Soldiers ate quickly, as if it were a competition.

Yan Ge and the other three stood out even more among the group. They exchanged glances and hurriedly picked up their eating pace.

Wei Hao frowned slightly. These four didn't look like soldiers at all, especially Qin Xiaosha and Yu Xiaoyao. They had the demeanor of noble young masters from prestigious families.

After everyone finished eating, Wei Hao said, "Go back and rest early."

Yan Ge and the others left the room, and their temporary roommates followed them. The rest of the group dawdled.

Once Yan Ge's group had left, Jiasen said, "Captain, who are these four exactly? This mission is extremely dangerous, and if they end up causing trouble…"

Zhang Qiao dismissed his concern, "Since they came, they should know the mission's dangers. I don't think we need to worry."

Wei Hao pondered for a moment, "In that case, tonight…"

Once back in his room, Yan Ge freshened up and climbed into bed. The summer nights in the northwest were peculiar—scorching during the day but pleasantly cool at night, making it comfortable to lie in bed without feeling stifled by the heat.

It didn't take long after Zhou Zheng lay down that he began snoring.

Yan Ge, who was used to sleeping with Huangfu Yuchen nearby—able to rest his head on him, press him down, or hold him in his arms—had a hard time falling asleep. He stared blankly for a while and tried to lull himself to sleep by counting, "One Yuchen, two Yuchen, three Yuchen, four Yuchen…"

After counting for a while, he dozed off in a daze. However, he was awakened by a slight clicking sound outside. He opened his eyes and, with

the faint moonlight, vaguely saw someone gently opening the window. A hidden weapon whizzed in and shot towards his bed.

Yan Ge quickly grabbed the canopy and wrapped the hidden weapon in it. Zhou Zheng continued to sleep soundly, unaware of the situation. Yan Ge raised an eyebrow, and a figure in white dashed out of the window like a streak of light.

Under the moonlight, a dark figure was fleeing rapidly into the distance.

Yan Ge leaped onto the rooftop. He took three or four steps before landing in front of the fleeing figure, blocking their path.

The figure was dressed in dark night clothes, with a black face mask concealing their features. In their right hand, they held a knife, glinting in the moonlight. They narrowed their eyes, then swung the knife towards Yan Ge.

The two started fighting on the deserted street.

After approximately a hundred moves, Yan Ge lifted his right foot and kicked the knife out of the figure’s hand.

The figure was startled and immediately turned to flee.

Yan Ge didn’t chase after them, letting out a yawn before effortlessly jumping back into the room through the window, lying down, and falling back to sleep.

In the darkness, Zhou Zheng opened his eyes, closed them again after a while, and went back to sleep.

At the third hour of the tiger (around 3 a.m.), it was still pitch black outside. The twenty-four people gathered in Wei Hao’s room, their eyes shifting from Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, Gao Feng, to Gao Yun’s faces. Last night, Wei Hao arranged for four people to test these four individuals. Although they looked nothing like soldiers, their martial arts skills were impressive, and the likelihood of them being a burden was extremely low, which put

Wei Hao at ease. From the fact that Yan Ge and the others didn’t harm those who were testing them, Wei Hao deduced that they had realized it was his attempt and they all tacitly chose not to say more about it.

Wei Hao turned and walked to the door, gesturing for them to follow.

He led them to the end of the first floor and pushed open a door, illuminating the room with a flint. Inside the room were twenty-four camouflage-colored equipment bags, each containing various portable weapons, rations, water bags, and more. Most of it had been prepared in advance by another team.

“Take your gear and get ready to move out.”

The twenty-four people left the inn and silently and swiftly moved towards a distant location in the night.

After about an hour of marching forward, they entered a dense forest, and Wei Hao stopped.

“We are now inside the territory of the Mai Kingdom. About four or five kilometers to the west, there’s a small gorge about half a kilometer long. It’s the only passage for the bandits to cross the border. The gorge is flanked by thick woods and intertwining vines, making it an excellent spot for us to conceal ourselves.”

“Captain, how did you know about this?” Huang Hui asked.

Wei Hao replied succinctly, “Another team scouted the route in advance to save us time. The shorter the time we spend in Dujiaping, the less likely it is for the Mai Kingdom to suspect us.”

“Understood.”

“Now, let’s have breakfast first and then continue forward,” Wei Hao said.

Eating breakfast in the gorge might leave food crumbs and arouse suspicion from the bandits. Everyone understood this logic and silently had their breakfast.

Inside the dense forest, it was stuffy and hot. Wei Hao wiped the sweat off his forehead and said, “Let’s keep going.”

When they arrived at the small gorge, the first light of dawn appeared on the horizon.

After positioning everyone for the ambush, Wei Hao walked back and forth in the gorge to ensure there were no suspicious traces before stealthily hiding in the lush grass.

Yan Ge lay on the ground, feeling somewhat uncomfortable. An ant slowly crawled towards him, seemingly intending to climb onto his head. He exhaled a breath and blew it far away.

Huangfu Yuchen was lying not far away, and a hint of a smile flashed in his eyes.

“Yuchen, does this bandit cavalry raid our territory every day? What if they don’t show up today?” Yan Ge transmitted his voice to Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “I sent a secret message with a deadly ultimatum. The longer this drags on, the more unfavorable it becomes. If they don’t show up today, Wei Hao will most likely decide to infiltrate the city of Zhuomudian.”

Yan Ge asked, “Let’s hope they do show up. This is a perfect ambush spot. It would be great to catch them all at once.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Mai kingdom’s staple foods are noodles and meat. They like our rice, but their kingdom is not suitable for rice cultivation, and they don’t want to spend money to buy it. So, they can only resort to stealing. They should show up.”

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The bandit cavalry captain was called Mai Maijiang. He rode a tall and sturdy horse, leading a hundred cavalrymen into the depths of the forest at a leisurely pace. Mai Maijiang had a tiger-like back and a bear-like waist, with only one eye; the other eye was covered by a black eye patch. Despite this, the cold light emanating from his intact eye still sent shivers down people's spines.

"Ke Mu, Chen Mujiang."

"Yes, boss!" Ke Mu and Chen Mujiang spurred their horses forward, heading towards the small gorge. The terrain of the small gorge was suitable for an ambush. Every time they traveled to Great Han, they would send scouts in advance to prevent any ambushes.

"Boss, this is really unnecessary. We've checked so many times. Have we ever found anyone ambushing there?" Ke Mu said, "The people of Great Han are all cowards and wouldn't dare to resist. Hahaha…"

"That's right," Chen Mujiang agreed, "The small gorge is our territory. Do you think people from Great Han would dare to come here?"

Despite their words, both of them didn't dare to disobey Mai Maijiang's orders and came to the small gorge. They glanced around carelessly but found nothing. They rode their horses back and reported to Mai Maijiang.

"Boss, it's clear."

Mai Maijiang nodded and spurred his horse forward, with others following quickly. The heavy and powerful sound of hooves startled the birds, and the rustling of leaves echoed.

The special forces lurking at the mouth of the West Gorge immediately sent word of the approaching sound of hooves using hand signals to others.

Zhou Zheng was hiding in a tree, arrow ready on the bowstring, prepared to shoot at any moment.

Mai Maijiang and his men entered the small gorge without noticing anything. As the last cavalryman also entered the gorge, two special forces members pushed a boulder down the slope, blocking their retreat. At the mouth of the East Gorge, Meng Gang did the same, obstructing their path. The one-hundred-strong cavalry unit was now trapped in the narrow gorge, and the frantic neighing of horses filled the air.

Mai Maijiang's expression changed drastically as he shouted, "It's an ambush!"

Zhou Zheng aimed his arrow at Mai Maijiang, and the arrow shot out like lightning, accurately hitting Mai Maijiang's chest.

Before Mai Maijiang could even speak, he fell off his horse.

"Neigh!" His horse neighed and rushed forward.

With Mai Maijiang dead, chaos broke out among the cavalry. Countless arrows shot out from all directions, raining down on them.

"Who is it? Show yourself if you dare!" Ke Mu swept the surroundings with his knife, scolding loudly, but he couldn't even spot a shadow.

The camouflage clothing of Great Han played a significant role, blending in with the leaves and making it difficult to detect their hiding spots.

The deputy leader Mu Suoli took cover behind a protrusion, shouting loudly, "Everyone, don't panic!"

The well-trained and powerful cavalry unit soon regained their composure and the battle inside the small gorge intensified.

“Make sure to guard both sides of the gorge’s mouth. Don’t let anyone escape!” After instructing Meng Gang Aand Huang Hui, Wei Hao jumped down the slope and joined the fierce fight.

The people of Mai kingdom, having grown up on the grasslands, had robust physiques and strong muscles, making their external martial arts formidable. One punch could crush a person’s chest.

The soldiers of Great Han excelled in agility, and if they possessed inner strength, their movements would be even more agile. One could imagine how intense the battle was.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun released several cold arrows from the shadows before leaping down from the trees to join the fight.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen wanted to see the skills of these special forces and didn’t reveal themselves for the time being.

In the corner of his eye, Yan Ge saw a wounded bandit trying to sneak into the forest to escape. He quietly took out a hidden weapon, ready to shoot, but unintentionally noticed a hornet’s nest the size of a melon hanging from a tree beside the cavalryman, weighing over ten jin.

He cunningly curled up his lips, raised his hand, and the hidden weapon hit the hornet’s nest with a “pop.” Suddenly, countless angry bees flew out of the nest and swarmed the bandit, covering his face almost entirely.

“Ah! Get away!” The bandit screamed in agony, frantically waving his sleeves, but protecting his face left his arms exposed. In no time, he was covered with stings and passed out.

Despite being foolish, Ke Mu was skilled in external martial arts, and his attacks were ruthless and fierce, exuding killing intent with every move. His curved knife left a horrifying gash on Zhang Qiao’s back, with flesh and skin protruding, almost revealing the bone.

Zhang Qiao groaned in pain, cold sweat breaking out all over his body, but he gritted his teeth and didn’t cry out. He knelt on one knee, but refused to

collapse.

Ke Mu laughed triumphantly and stepped forward, raising his knife to cut off Zhang Qiao’s head.

Wei Hao shouted loudly, lunged forward, and fiercely blocked the curved knife.

Ke Mu shouted, “Brothers, attack! There are only twenty-something of them!”

The morale of the cavalry unit rose, and they charged forward fearlessly to besiege Wei Hao and the others.

Wei Hao killed two people while fighting Ke Mu. At the same time, he subtly led Ke Mu up the slope. Ke Mu was so focused on killing these people that he didn’t notice anything amiss.

After a few more moves, Wei Hao and the others darted into the thickets like arrows.

Ke Mu was shocked and quickly looked around, but he had indeed lost sight of Wei Hao.

Ke Mu swung his knife randomly towards the bushes, “If you want to fight, then fight openly. What kind of heroes sneak around like this?”

Unbeknownst to Ke Mu, Wei Hao quietly stood up behind him and thrust his knife into his back.

Ke Mu’s facial muscles twitched violently, and he hurriedly turned to defend.

“What makes you bunch of shameless villains who do all kinds of evil qualified to fight openly?” Wei Hao taunted and engaged Ke Mu in battle once again.

Zhou Zheng was surrounded and forced to retreat by three bandits. One of them grinned smugly, raised his knife, and aimed at Zhou Zheng’s back.

With nowhere to advance or retreat, Zhou Zheng was about to be attacked when a green and unripe fruit flew out of the bushes and struck the acupoint of the bandit. The bandit was instantly immobilized.

Zhou Zheng glanced at the thicket and turned around. In a swift move, he killed the immobilized bandit.

At this moment, there were still over twenty bandits left. The special forces were in a sorry state, with their camouflage clothing either torn with large gashes or covered in dirt. However, their morale remained unwavering, and they fought even more bravely.

Yan Ge said to Huangfu Yuchen, “It’s our turn to take action. If you don’t, others will criticize us.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded.

The two of them leaped from the bushes, swiftly taking down four bandits with just a few strikes.

This greatly relieved the pressure on the other special forces members. After about a quarter of an hour of intense fighting, the remaining bandits were all eliminated.

Jiasen sat on the ground, clutching his wound as he looked at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen mockingly, “You finally came out? I thought you would stay hidden like turtles!”

Gao Feng and Gao Yun’s expressions changed drastically as they both sternly scolded him, “Impudent!”

Jiasen was startled by the stern reprimand from the two of them, but he provocatively raised an eyebrow, “What? Is what I said not true?”

Huangfu Yuchen’s cold gaze pierced into Jiasen’s eyes, causing the latter to break out in cold sweat.

Yan Ge held Huangfu Yuchen’s hand and shook his head.

Huangfu Yuchen stared at Jiasen and calmly spoke, “Why don’t you think about what your fate would have been if the four of us hadn’t come?”

Jiasen was speechless.

Wei Hao stood up and said, “Enough, let’s not say anything more. Qin Xiaosa and Yu Xiaoyao didn’t take action at the beginning, but we have to admit that it was thanks to them lurking in the shadows that we were able to ambush the bandit calvary.”

“That’s right, we’re all brothers, so let’s not dwell on it,” Meng Gang also intervened to mediate.

Wei Hao continued, “Brothers, let’s first count the number of bandits and make sure they are all dead, with none escaping.”

“Yes!”

Several uninjured special forces members spread out to count the bodies and to make sure they were all dealt with by striking their vital points to prevent any chances of escape. Others took out medical kits and treated each other’s wounds to prevent infection.

Wei Hao secretly observed Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. The remark “impudent” from Gao Feng and Gao Yun made him curious. Who exactly are these two? He was certain that Qin Xiaosa and Yu Xiaoyao didn’t refrain from action at the beginning due to cowardice but for some other reason, not just for the element of surprise. However, he couldn’t figure out what that reason might be.

Huang Hui approached and reported, “Captain, it’s exactly one hundred men, not one escaped.”

“Good,” Wei Hao said, “Clean up all traces of our presence.”

“Yes!”

After dealing with the aftermath, the group finally left the small gorge. The bodies of the bandits were left where they were; they would be discovered

by the people from the Mai Kingdom eventually.

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Upon returning to the inn, Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, Gao Feng, and Gao Yun cleaned up and changed into regular clothes before entering Wei Hao's room.

"Are you leaving?" Wei Hao asked knowingly.

"Indeed. We came to bid farewell to Captain Wei," Yan Ge replied.

Wei Hao nodded.

"When do you plan to return to the capital?" Huangfu Yuchen asked.

"We'll leave today," Wei Hao answered.

Yan Ge clasped his fists and said, "I wish you all a safe journey. Until we meet again."

"Until we meet again," Wei Hao responded.

After Yan Ge and his group left the inn, they went to meet Yan Jin.

Yan Jin was pacing at the entrance of the inn, but when he saw them, he quickly approached.

"Father, you're back! Come and see Tiantian," Yan Jin said eagerly.

"What happened to Tiantian?" Yan Ge asked worriedly.

"He seems to have realized that his mother has left him. He silently sheds tears, but he doesn't cry out. It's so distressing to watch," Yan Jin shook his head.

“I see. As long as he’s not sick, it’s fine,” Yan Ge sighed with relief, walking faster. He also transformed back into his original appearance after making sure no one was around.

As they entered the room, Yan Xiangtian, who was being hugged by the nurse, noticed them and tearfully called out, “Uncle…”

Yan Ge immediately picked him up and comforted, “There, there, don’t cry. Uncle is here.”

The little one’s sobbing turned into laughter as he wrapped his little arm around Yan Ge’s neck and gently pulled at his hair, amusing himself and forgetting his previous distress.

Yan Ge chuckled, wiping away the tears. He took out some tasty snacks and fruits from the system’s backpack, placing them in a delicate bamboo basket on the bed.

“Little Jin, you can feed Tiantian with a spoon if he wants to eat fruits,” Yan Ge instructed.

“I understand,” Yan Jin replied.

Huangfu Yuchen stood by the window, looking out at the street absentmindedly.

“What are you thinking about?” Yan Ge walked over and hugged him from behind, resting his chin on his shoulder.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “I’m thinking, if we could hire martial artists from the martial world to teach the soldiers in the military camp, would they be willing to do it?”

Yan Ge’s eyes lit up, “That’s a good idea! However, martial artists from the martial world seem to naturally avoid mingling with the imperial court’s people. It might not be easy to persuade them.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded in agreement, “But the court has never targeted martial artists from the martial world these years. I believe it’s worth a try.

There will always be someone willing among a thousand people.”

“I support you!” Yan Ge encouraged, planting a kiss on his cheek. Leaning against the window, he continued, “Today, I carefully observed the bandit cavalry from the Mai Kingdom. Perhaps due to growing up on the grasslands, their physical strength is generally stronger than our soldiers. Leaving aside the special forces, if the ordinary soldiers from the Mai Kingdom and our ordinary soldiers were to fight one on one, our soldiers might not be their match.”

Huangfu Yuchen admitted, “That’s why I thought of using the martial artists’ help. But I still need to think about the specifics.”

“I just want to remind you that no matter what approach you take, don’t hurt the martial artists’ pride,” Yan Ge cautioned.

“I will be careful,” Huangfu Yuchen turned around and kissed him back. “I’ll let you know when I’ve thought it through, and you can give me your input.”

“No problem.”

After finishing lunch, Gao Feng prepared the carriage, and the group set out after reestablishing their disguises and left the city.

Wei Hao and his team also planned to leave. They coincidentally saw Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen riding horses alongside a familiar carriage, confirming their previous guess—they were indeed together.

“I didn’t inform my big brother about coming to Xiguan Pass, nor that I was coming with Tiantian. I bet he will be very surprised,” Yan Ge laughed while riding on the horse.

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “If you hadn’t told him about his wife giving birth to a son for him, he would have been even more shocked.”

“That’s impossible. Even if I didn’t tell him, my parents would,” Yan Ge said.

The journey was smooth, and five days later, the group arrived at Xiguan Pass.

Before they even got closer, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen saw a massive stone statue facing east at the city gate, about four or five people tall. Several soldiers dressed in armor stood proudly, some wielding long spears, some mounted on warhorses with raised swords as if they were about to fight to the death. Their unwavering gazes stared straight ahead, earning them great respect from the people. Almost every citizen entering the city would fold their hands and bow before passing through the gate.

Huangfu Yuchen expressed satisfaction, saying, “Cao Zhan did a good job.”

“The changes in the city must be even more significant,” Yan Ge commented.

“We have arrived at last,” Yan Jin hopped off the carriage, “Father, can we stay longer in the city this time? The rushed journey was so boring.”

Yan Ge also dismounted, “We can stay longer this time. Auntie Zhai, is Tiantian awake?”

“Little Young Master just woke up and is hungry now,” Auntie Zhai replied from inside the carriage.

“Let him eat first.”

The group lined up and entered the city. The changes inside the city were indeed substantial, it had become much more bustling since their last visit. The streets were filled with people and carriages, and the vendors’ voices calling out their goods were constant.

The lifelike sculptures occasionally seen on the streets had become a unique feature of Xiguan Pass.

Gao Feng took the lead and found an inn. After everyone freshened up, they proceeded to General Cao’s mansion.

Yan Xiangtian was led by Yan Jin, walking slowly as he looked around curiously. Everything around him seemed novel and exciting.

At the entrance of the General's mansion, four soldiers stood guard.

Gao Feng approached them, saying, "Brothers, could you please announce that General Cao's old friends, Master and Madam Fang have come to visit?"

"Please wait a moment," one of the soldiers turned and ran inside.

After a short while, Cao Zhan hurried out and was startled to see Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. He quickly approached and bowed, "Young Master Fang, Madam Fang, please come in!"

Once they entered the hall, Cao Zhan lifted his robes and knelt down.

"I pay my respects to Your Majesty, long live the Emperor! Greetings to Yan Guiqing!" he greeted Huangfu Yuchen and then turned to Yan Ge, "Please forgive me for not welcoming you promptly. I had no idea when His Majesty and Yan Caiqing would grace us with their presence. I beg Your Majesty's pardon!"

"Uninformed people cannot be blamed. There's no need to apologize," Huangfu Yuchen said. "Rise."

"Thank you, Your Majesty!" Cao Zhan stood to the side.

Yan Ge asked, "General Cao, do you know how my elder brother is doing lately?"

In response, Cao Zhan said, "Master Yan is doing well. Not long ago, he was promoted to the rank of military officer. Apart from me and Feng Zhun, no one else knows his true identity. His promotion to military officer was solely based on his own efforts."

Military officer? Yan Ge looked to Huangfu Yuchen for clarification.

Huangfu Yuchen patted his head and explained, “In short, a military officer is responsible for managing an army, which consists of five divisions and a total of 12,500 soldiers.”

“I see.” Yan Ge felt happy for Yan Su’s progress and said, “Please ask General Cao to inform him of my arrival. Since he wants to conceal his identity, let him come to Rongchang Inn to see me.”

“Yes, I will arrange for someone to do so,” Cao Zhan replied.

“Yuchen, you can discuss official matters with General Cao. I’ll return to the inn first,” Yan Ge told Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded.

Yan Ge then took Yan Xiangtian and Yan Jin back to the inn.

“Tiantian, you’ll soon meet your father. Are you excited?” Yan Ge teased Yan Xiangtian.

“Excited!” Though Yan Xiangtian had never met Yan Su, his family often mentioned “father” to him, so the word was not unfamiliar.

Shortly after, someone knocked on the door.

Yan Ge opened it, and a young man with a copper-colored complexion and stubble around his mouth walked in with a pleasantly surprised expression.

“Second Brother!”

“Big Brother.”

The two brothers embraced each other.

Yan Ge looked Yan Su up and down, smiling, “You have completely become a military officer now. I fear that when you return home, our father and mother wouldn’t be able to recognize you.”

The previous Yan Su, while not quite described as weak and bookish, had an air of scholarly refinement. However, the Yan Su before him now had been tempered by the military camp, exhibiting a strong physique and a chilling aura, exuding the atmosphere of a seasoned soldier.

Yan Su also smiled, “It’s not as exaggerated as you say. How are Father and Mother?”

“They’re both doing well, as is my sister-in-law.” Yan Ge teased him.

Yan Su sighed lightly, “I owe her an apology.”

“Don’t worry, she doesn’t feel that way. Here, take this.”

Yan Su was about to ask “what,” when he suddenly found something soft in his arms. He looked down and suddenly met a pair of innocent, grape-like black eyes, and he froze in surprise.

“This, this… this is, is…” He unconsciously loosened his grip, awkwardly holding Yan Xiangtian and speaking incoherently, fearing that he had guessed wrong.

Yan Ge nodded with a smile.

“My son!” Yan Su lifted the little one up, tears in his eyes, “He’s my son! He looks exactly like me!”

Yan Ge found it amusing. He knew that at this moment, Yan Su probably couldn’t hear any external sounds. Instead of getting involved in their exchange, he sat down and poured two cups of tea.

“Look at these eyes, they’re just like mine; the forehead resembles mine; the nose too! Second Brother, do you see? Especially his chin, it’s just like mine!”

Yan Su planted a kiss on Yan Xiangtian’s tender face.

Unexpectedly being held in the arms of a stranger, Yan Xiangtian burst into tears. His face was also stung by the stubble, and he immediately vented in

grievance, “Waa…”

“Hahaha! Even his loud voice is just like mine when I was a child!” Yan Su laughed heartily, “Son, I am your father! Give me a smile.”

Yan Ge looked on with an expression of speechlessness. “He’s not familiar with you yet; you shouldn’t scare him.”

“How could I scare him when I’m his father?” Yan Su evaded Yan Ge’s hands and said, “Don’t hold him; I’ll familiarize myself with him.”

“Uncle…” Yan Xiangtian pouted, his eyes following Yan Ge, and both chubby arms reached out to him, looking adorable and melting hearts.

Yan Ge knew that Yan Su had little time with his son, so he had to muster the heart to ignore Yan Xiangtian.

“Big Brother, take him outside for a walk and find some fun things to entertain him,” Yan Ge suggested.

“Yes, that’s a good idea.” Yan Su held Yan Xiangtian and turned to leave.

Yan Ge instructed the maid that came with them, “Qing Xue, follow them discreetly and avoid showing yourself unless necessary.”

“Yes.”

After half an hour, Yan Su returned with Yan Xiangtian who was happily playing with a drum in his arms. It was evident that a certain bond had formed between father and son, perhaps due to a natural connection between them.

Yan Ge felt relieved.

“Second Brother, thank you,” Yan Su expressed his gratitude. It would take at least half a month to travel from the capital to Xiguan Pass. During this time, his son not only didn’t fall ill but also maintained his chubby arms and legs, making him look like a lotus root joint. This demonstrated how

carefully and thoughtfully his younger brother took care of him. There were no words to describe how he grateful he was.

“There’s no need for thanks between brothers.” Yan Ge then asked about Yan Su’s recent experiences.

Yan Su recounted everything. He had no reason to hide anything from Yan Ge; even the few minor injuries he had suffered, which were not mentioned in the letters, were shared.

If one wanted to climb up the ranks in the military camp, they could only rely on solid achievements, or else they wouldn’t gain recognition. Since arriving at Xiguan Pass, he had participated in several operations against bandits and even engaged in a small-scale war with the Mai Kingdom, which had gradually led to his promotion to a military officer.

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After a pleasant conversation between the two brothers, Yan Ge said, “Big brother, you can stay at the inn and keep Tiantian company. I will request a leave from the General Cao on your behalf.”

Yan Su nodded, “Is he at his residence?”

“Yes,” Yan Ge replied.

Yan Su continued, “I thought so. There has been a major incident at Xiguan recently.”

“Oh?” Yan Ge was surprised, “What happened?”

Yan Su replied, “I’m not sure about the specifics, but it’s related to Yinshan Hall. Members of Yinshan Hall have visited the General’s residence several times, and both General Cao and Counselor Feng have been looking serious and in a hurry these days.”

“Yinshan Hall?” Yan Ge was puzzled.

Yan Su explained, “Yinshan Hall is a martial arts sect and the only one at Xiguan pass Though they belong to the martial world, they never disturb the people and often do good deeds within their capabilities. A few years ago, they even helped the border garrison resist the invading troops of the Mai Kingdom, which earned them considerable respect in the local area.”

“I see. Big brother, your room is next door. Until we leave, you just need to take care of Tiantian, you don’t need to worry about anything else. I think Yuchen will be back soon.”

“Alright, then I’ll go there first.”

After Yan Su left, Yan Ge waited in the room for a while, but Huangfu Yuchen had not returned yet. So he decided to bring Yan Jin back to the General's residence.

Following Cao Zhan's instructions, the attendants took him directly to the room outside the study.

"General, Madam Fang is here."

Cao Zhan heard the voice and quickly opened the door, welcoming Yan Ge inside, then gestured to the attendant, "You may leave."

"Yes."

"Were you anxious?" Huangfu Yuchen asked Yan Ge softly.

Yan Ge nodded, "I heard from my big brother that there has been a major incident in the Xiguan related to Yinshan Hall."

Huangfu Yuchen signaled to Cao Zhan.

Cao Zhan said, "Let me explain, Yan Guiqing. About six days ago, the daughter of Yinshan Hall's leader, Zeng Shouli, suddenly came to seek an audience, claiming that her father, Zeng Shouli, and six of his disciples went to the ancient Yidian city of the Mai Kingdom a month ago and have not returned yet. Yidian is not far from the border, and it takes at most three days to travel from the Xiguan to Yidian. She suspects that her father and his disciples have been killed by the people of the Mai Kingdom. I couldn't understand why she had such a suspicion, but after further questioning, she revealed that about two months ago, a secret rumor began to spread in the martial world about a huge treasure buried in Yidian. This city not only contains many rare treasures but also holds the remains of the venerable monk Xuna, who passed away a century ago in the Mai Kingdom. It is said that consuming these remains can greatly enhance one's martial arts prowess. Not only Yinshan Hall but many other martial sects rushed to Yidian, and they all lost contact. So, she suspected that something big happened. Yinshan Hall is now short of manpower so she sought help from the official army. Upon hearing this, I immediately dispatched people to

investigate. Indeed, two months ago, there were rumors of the treasure in the martial world, and many martial artists have gone missing."

Yan Jin's eyes lit up. 'Treasure!'

Yan Ge asked curiously, "What kind of treasure is it? So many people believe in its existence so there must be a reason, right?"

Cao Zhan explained, "Yes. About ninety years ago, there was a ten-year-long war between the Hu Mai and Suyi nobles in the Mai Kingdom, struggling for the imperial power. The Hu Mai nobles were powerful in martial strength, while the Suyi nobles were wealthy. Both sides had their advantages, which prolonged the war for ten years. In the end, due to the sudden support of the Hebu nobles, the Hu Mai nobles defeated the Suyi nobles and caused their forces to collapse like a mountain. At that time, the leader of the Suyi nobles, Suyi Malo, seemed to have a premonition. With the protection of his subordinates, he timely withdrew along with a large number of loyal followers, and they disappeared with a large number of treasures. It is said that the Hu Mai imperial family has been searching for these treasures for years, but without any success."

As for the venerable monk Xuna, he was a well-known monk in several neighboring kingdoms, who was said to have the ability to see the past and future. His actual age exceeded two hundred years, and after his death, his body was cremated, leaving behind a relic weighing over one or two catties. Originally, this relic was enshrined in the Xuna Temple, but it mysteriously disappeared, and no one has heard of its whereabouts since. Therefore, those martial artists believe that there is a high possibility of the relic being with the treasure.

Huangfu Yuchen said to Yan Ge, "We haven't heard anything about this matter, which shows that our court's involvement in martial matters is still insufficient."

Yan Ge shook his head, "It's not their fault. Just think about it, if you knew the whereabouts of a treasure, would you tell others? If the martial world really wants to hide something, it would be difficult for us to detect."

Huangfu Yuchen's expression turned serious, "If those martial artists really encounter trouble, they will either start bloody battles in the martial world to compete for power or their forces will collapse. This is not a good thing."

"General Cao, what's your plan regarding this matter?" Yan Ge asked.

Cao Zhan replied, "They encountered trouble within the Mai Kingdom's borders, so even if we want to intervene, we cannot do so in the name of the official army. I planned to send some people to disguise themselves and venture into Yidian to find out more."

Huangfu Yuchen pondered for a moment and made a decision, "I will handle this matter personally."

"Your Majesty?" Cao Zhan was surprised.

Huangfu Yuchen waved his hand, "I have my own plan."

Cao Zhan looked at Yan Ge anxiously, hoping he could persuade Huangfu Yuchen. After all, Huangfu Yuchen was the precious imperial emperor. It was inconvenient for him to travel in the Mai Kingdom's territory. If anything happened, they wouldn't be able to rescue him in time.

Yan Ge also wanted to know if the treasure's existence was real, and if it was, they should claim it as their own. He dissuaded Cao Zhan, "General Cao, since His Majesty has decided, he must have his reasons. You don't need to say more. If you're still worried, prepare for any unexpected battles during our absence."

"Yan Guiqing, this… Your Majesty venturing personally is not appropriate," Cao Zhan wanted to persuade further but Huangfu Yuchen gave him a stern look, and he had to give up. "If that's the case, please take care, Your Majesty and Yan Guiqing! I will make preparations immediately if needed."

Huangfu Yuchen thanked him for his loyalty and said, "Prepare four sets of rations, water, and medical kits."

“Yes!”

Yan Ge asked Huangfu Yuchen excitedly, “Yuchen, when are we leaving?”

Huangfu Yuchen saw through his thoughts and smiled, “After continuous travel for almost half a month, let’s rest well today and set out early tomorrow.”

Cao Zhan suggested, “The inn is crowded. Your Majesty and Yan Caiqing might as well rest in the General’s residence. I’ll have someone arrange the rooms.”

“That sounds good,” Huangfu Yuchen agreed.

Cao Zhan sent someone to inform Yan Su and several guards at the inn.

“Papa, Father, I want to go too,” Yan Jin said to Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

Yan Ge teased, “Didn’t you complain about being bored with all the continuous traveling recently? But now that you know there’s something exciting ahead, you don’t feel bored anymore?”

During lunch, Feng Zhun returned to the General’s residence and was surprised and delighted to find that the Emperor and Yan Guiqing had arrived. He quickly paid his respects.

Yan Ge looked at Cao Zhan and Feng Zhun suspiciously, then he noticed their embarrassed and fearful expressions. In fact, they had already been together, but due to the court’s regulations, if the border commander wanted to marry, they had to inform the court, and the official partner couldn’t stay at the border. Therefore, they had not officially married yet. If the Emperor didn’t mind, it would be considered a momentary weakness, but if the Emperor minded, it would be a crime of deceiving the monarch.

Both of them were about to kneel and plead, but seeing Yan Ge slightly shaking his head and jokingly smiling at them, they understood. The

Emperor had also noticed, but he didn't want to make a fuss about it. They felt grateful to Yan Ge and the Emperor in their hearts.

Cao Zhan said, "Report to Your Majesty, I took the liberty and inquired about the caravans heading to the Mai Kingdom tomorrow."

"What were the results?" Huangfu Yuchen asked.

"There's a 'Guangyuan Caravan' leaving as soon as the city gates open tomorrow."

"We'll travel with them," Huangfu Yuchen decided.

"Yes, I'll arrange it immediately."

The next day, at the break of dawn, Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, Yan Jin, Gao Feng, and Gao Yun prepared everything and joined the Guangyuan Caravan at the city gates.

"Wait!" A woman's voice came with the approaching sound of galloping hooves.

Yan Ge and the others initially didn't pay much attention, but soon they felt a woman rushing towards them and stopping beside them.

The woman on the horse was about eighteen or nineteen years old, with a charming appearance, bright and lively eyes, and a practical and neat outfit. She looked heroic and brave.

She stared at Yan Ge and the others, lowered her voice, and asked, "Are you the spied arranged by General Cao? I'm Zeng Zhenzhen."

Yan Ge said, "I don't understand what you're talking about."

"Stop pretending," Zeng Zhenzhen said firmly, "I saw you coming out of the General's residence. Bringing this child with you must be to disguise your identity as spies, right?"

Yan Ge was speechless, thinking that this little girl was quite clever. Because he was accustomed to ignoring non-hostile gazes, he didn't notice Zeng Zhenzhen's presence when he left the General's residence.

Yan Ge said, "So what if we are? What if we're not?"

Zeng Zhenzhen replied, "I'm going with you."

"No need, taking care of one child is enough for us, and we can't take care of you too," Yan Ge refused.

Zeng Zhenzhen said proudly, "I don't need you to take care of me! I just need to get to Yidian as quickly as possible. As a woman, I might encounter trouble if I travel alone, which will waste time."

Yan Ge looked at Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen calmly said to Zeng Zhenzhen, "You're mistaken. This child isn't here to disguise our identity; he's really our son."

Zeng Zhenzhen was stunned.

Yan Ge was also taken aback. Why did Yuchen suddenly bring this up? When he saw Huangfu Yuchen warning Zeng Zhenzhen with his eyes, he suddenly understood and burst into laughter.

"Let's go," Huangfu Yuchen called to him helplessly.

Yan Ge chuckled and followed. This man. Wasn't he just saying a few words to this young girl? Why did he get jealous?

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Zeng Zhenzhen was a clever girl.
Huangfu Yuchen glared at her for no apparent reason and when she saw Yan Ge unable to stop laughing, she immediately understood what was going on. Her pretty face blushed, “Presumptuous! Conceited! Thinking highly of yourself! Just because you’re good-looking, you think everyone will fall for you? Hmph! I’m afraid of you being interested in me!”

“Sister, you can rest assured now,” Yan Jin said with a smile.

Yan Jin’s cute and adorable appearance successfully won over Zeng Zhenzhen.

“So cute. What’s your name?” Zeng Zhenzhen asked.

“I’m Luo Jiacheng. My Papa is Shu Shi, and my father is Luo Fang,” Yan Jin introduced himself, not forgetting to echo Huangfu Yuchen’s previous words, earning an approving look from the latter.

Zeng Zhenzhen finally believed that they were indeed a family of three.

During the conversation, the merchant convoy had already left the city.

Yan Ge and his group followed the horse convoy until they reached the checkpoint of the Mai Kingdom, where they parted ways.

Gao Fan inquired about the location of Yidian city, and the group headed directly in that direction m At the entrance was a teahouse. The group led their horses and walked over, looking into the town with confusion. There wasn’t a single soul on the streets; Yidian seemed like an empty city.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen exchanged glances, immediately becoming vigilant.

The teahouse's owner was an old man in his sixties with a hunched back. Carrying a tray of tea, he shuffled over and asked with a hoarse voice, "Miss, Masters, your tea is ready."

Zeng Zhenzhen doubted if they had come to the wrong place, "Boss, is this Yidian?"

"Yes," the old man said slowly as he poured the tea.

Zeng Zhenzhen said, "It's strange. How come there's not a single person in the city?"

"Are you here to find the treasure?" The old man's sudden question made Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, and Zeng Zhenzhen tense.

"How do you know?" Zeng Zhenzhen drew her sword and pointed it at him, asking sternly, "Who are you?"

The old man didn't mind the sword at his neck and continued to pour tea, calmly and slowly saying, "From two months ago, groups of foreigners have been coming here to find the treasure. Small fights every three days, big fights every five days, and the place is in constant chaos. The people here have never seen anyone fly in the sky or behead someone with a single sword, so they all fled to seek refuge with relatives and friends. This old man has no relatives and, being old and weak, can't walk, so I can only stay here. During this time, I've seen many people like you, carrying knives and swords, entering the town, but I've never seen them come out."

Zeng Zhenzhen was shocked, "Not a single person came out?"

"Yes," the old man finished pouring the tea and sat down on a small stool, gently fanning himself.

"Could they have left through other city gates?" Zeng Zhenzhen asked, unwilling to give up.

The old man shook his head, “Maybe. But it would be strange that everyone chose to leave through other gates.”

Zeng Zhenzhen also dismissed her speculation, “That’s right. It’s impossible for everyone to choose other exits. What is going on here?” She looked at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen in bewilderment.

Yan Ge asked, “Old man, are you the only one left in the whole town now?”

The old man said, “I’m not sure. I haven’t been to other places, and I haven’t seen anyone else.”

“What do we do?” Zeng Zhenzhen asked.

Yan Ge said, “Let’s go in and take a look.”

He stood up and went to fetch the horses.

Suddenly, a “gurgling” sound came from behind.

Zeng Zhenzhen held her stomach in embarrassment, “I’m… I’m hungry. Don’t you all feel hungry?”

Yan Ge was speechless. He and Huangfu Yuchen had reached the Golden Core stage, so they didn’t need to eat. Yan Jin’s cultivation level was also high, and he could go days without eating. Gao Fan and Gao Yun had already eaten dry rations while on horseback.

“Boss, do you have any food in this teahouse?” Zeng Zhenzhen asked.

“We do, but only flour, vegetables, and radishes,” the old man said.

Zeng Zhenzhen said helplessly, “Could you make us something to eat? I’ll treat you all.”

Zeng Zhenzhen was just a young girl, and they couldn’t really leave her alone. So, Yan Ge nodded, “Then we won’t be polite.”

The old man was old, and it took nearly half an hour to cook the meal.

Zeng Zhenzhen’s stomach kept rumbling. At first, she blushed with embarrassment, but later she became composed and pretended not to hear it, chatting calmly with Yan Jin.

The old man made some pancakes, stir-fried vegetables, and radishes, along with a vegetable soup.

Yan Ge, Yan Jin, and Huangfu Yuchen didn’t eat much, but Zeng Zhenzhen finished two servings in one go. She proactively explained, “I ate enough so that I wouldn’t be hungry if I stay for too long without anything to eat.”

In the end, she even bought the three extra pancakes the old man made.

Afterward, they led their horses around the area, searching for any clues and traces. From the broken fragments on the ground, dried bloodstains, collapsed walls, and chopped-off trees, it was evident that this place had experienced several intense battles.

Zeng Zhenzhen nervously hugged her arms, “There’s not a single soul here; this is really creepy.”

“Xiao Ge, use your spiritual consciousness,” Huangfu Yuchen transmitted to Yan Ge.

Yan Ge knew he must have discovered something and immediately released his spiritual consciousness. His consciousness penetrated everything, and he immediately sensed movements coming from underground a couple of miles away.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Since the teahouse owner never saw anyone leaving the city, it can be inferred that they disappeared inside the city. In other words, there’s a hidden mechanism or underground passage somewhere in the city.”

“That makes sense,” Yan Ge nodded.

However, because of Zeng Zhenzhen’s presence, they couldn’t openly investigate, so they had to pretend to casually explore each of the main

streets in the city.

With no success, Zeng Zhenzhen's face turned completely pale, and she started shouting anxiously, "Father! Big Brother! Second Brother! Where are you? Father—Father—"

"Yuchen, how do we find the mechanism in such a big city?" Yan Ge was also at a loss, "We can't just use brute force to dig up the ground, right?"

Huangfu Yuchen: "Look for the place with the most intense signs of fighting."

"Boss, young master, let's go there," Gao Yun suggested one direction.

After a while, Yan Jin clapped his hands.

"Father, Papa, it's here!"

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen walked over and looked up at the signboard on the gate.

"Biliu Manor?"

Yan Jin said, "I saw that many tables inside were smashed, and there were many dishes, as if there had been a grand feast here before."

"Well done," Huangfu Yuchen praised and walked in with Yan Ge.

Zeng Zhenzhen asked impatiently, "Are you guys looking for something to eat here? You didn't eat when I invited you for a meal before!"

"Sister, be patient! Father and Papa are searching for clues," Yan Jin explained.

Zeng Zhenzhen calmed down a bit and looked around, asking in confusion, "What clues could be here?"

Neither Yan Ge nor Huangfu Yuchen answered her. They carefully observed all the furnishings in the house and occasionally tapped on the walls.

Yan Ge saw some bottles on a display shelf and tried to twist them one by one. As he tried the second one, he heard a faint sliding sound.

“A secret passage!” Zeng Zhenzhen exclaimed as she saw the hidden doorway on the floor.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Let’s go down.”

Gao Feng said, “Boss, this subordinate lead the way.”

“I’ll go. Both of you stay at the rear,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

“Yes!”

“Zirui, be careful of traps,” Yan Ge reminded.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Don’t worry. Give me your Night Pearl, and you and Jiacheng follow me.”

Zeng Zhenzhen was surprised. ‘The Night Pearl? That was an invaluable treasure. What were the identities of these two spies? They actually possessed such a t’

But she didn’t have the mood to dwell on that and quickly followed the others.

Thanks to Yan Ge’s Night Pearl, everything in the secret passage could be seen clearly. The entrance of the passage was not large, but after going inside, they found that the underground path was quite spacious, about a foot and a half high and six feet wide, even enough for a carriage to pass through.

There was only one passage, and they continued forward without encountering any of the feared traps. After walking for about the time it takes to burn an incense stick, the passage turned left, and they could clearly sense the presence of people not far ahead.

Yan Ge carefully sensed it and was startled. He transmitted his voice, “There are more than eight hundred people down there. It seems like

they’re trapped; otherwise, they wouldn’t have stayed here for so long.”

Yan Jin also transmitted, “Father, there’s a very uncomfortable aura here.”

“Is everything all right?” Yan Ge asked him with concern.

“I’m fine, I just don’t like it,” Yan Jin said.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “There must be something strange here, be cautious.”

Zeng Zhenzhen didn’t know that the three of them were communicating through voice transmission and urged, “Why aren’t we moving?”

Huangfu Yuchen turned back and glanced at her coldly, “You better be careful. If something happens, we won’t have time to save you.”

Zeng Zhenzhen’s face darkened with anger, but considering that they were the ones who found the secret passage, and judging from the performance of this group, even the young Yan Jin, they did seem capable. She calmed down and kept quiet, no longer urging them.

Huangfu Yuchen covered the light of the Night Pearl with his hand and then proceeded.

After about twenty feet, the space suddenly widened. Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen cautiously poked their heads out from behind the wall and were shocked to see rows of prison cells separated by iron bars. Inside the cells, men and women dressed like martial artists were sitting or standing, some with angry expressions and restlessness, while others looked melancholic, their eyes dull as if they had lost the will to live.

“Goodness, they’ve actually captured so many martial artists,” Yan Ge said indignantly.

Huangfu Yuchen analyzed, “Their inner strength should have been sealed, otherwise, they wouldn’t be so passive.”

Yan Ge observed carefully. “I don’t see any guards. Should we directly go over and find out what’s going on?”

Huangfu Yuchen pondered for a moment and said, “We are their only hope. When they see us appear, if they are clever enough, they shouldn’t alert the guards in other places.”

Zeng Zhenzhen looked at the two of them, puzzled by their inaction, and couldn’t help asking softly, “Why… aren’t we… going?”

Huangfu Yuchen reached out and pressed her mute acupoint.

Zeng Zhenzhen looked at him in shock.

Huangfu Yuchen ignored her and said to Yan Ge, Gao Feng, and Gao Yun, “Let’s go over.”

As soon as they appeared, the people in the prison cells noticed them and rushed over, gripping the iron bars tightly.

“You are from Great Han! Hurry, save us!”

“Hush!” Yan Ge made a hushing gesture.

The people immediately quieted down.

“We are indeed here to rescue you. What exactly is going on? How did you end up being imprisoned here?” Yan Ge asked.

One of them anxiously said, “Save us first, and then we’ll talk!”

Huangfu Yuchen gave him a cold look, “Your inner strength has all been sealed. If we don’t find a way to restore it first, do you expect us to carry more than eight hundred burdens like you?”

The man choked.

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“Master Luo, Madam Luo!” Someone recognized Yan Ge and called out in surprise.

“Madam Pei?” Yan Ge also recognized the woman and the middle-aged man waving to them from behind the bars. They were none other than the “Deceptive Duo”.

“Madam Luo, it’s such a relief to see you!” Huang Shuya’s face looked tired, but her joy was evident. The Luo couple had some acquaintance with her and her husband.

Others in the cell noticed the couple knew Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, and they approached excitedly.

“Madam Luo, Master Luo, it’s been a long time.” Zhong Xie waved from the cell opposite them, looking rather optimistic as if being confined had no effect on him.

Yan Ge said, “Xiao Tianxie, I never thought that your Escort Bureau would smuggle goods through foreign routes.”

Zhong Xie shrugged, “It’s better to avoid foreign routes from now on.”

Now was not the time for casual chatter. Yan Ge didn’t say much and asked about the main matter, “We indeed came to rescue all of you. But, what is going on here exactly?”

Huangfu Yuchen ordered Gao Feng and Gao Yun to investigate thoroughly and check if there were any other exits in the underground cave.

Huang Shuya sighed, “It’s all because of our greed. We heard about the relics and came here. Initially, we were skeptical when we suddenly heard news of the treasure. However, the reappearance of the Relics in the martial world made us curious. The information was released by the owner of Biliu Manor, only he knew the detailed information. He invited us to Biliu Manor for a feast to discuss the search for the treasure together, and we agreed. We secretly checked the food and drink, and there seemed to be no issue. I don’t know how he managed to drug us; we were affected, and when we woke up, we found ourselves in this cell, with our inner strength suppressed. It was terrifying.”

“That’s not all,” Pei Jinde interjected. “During this time, one or two people are taken away almost every day and never return. We have no idea what they plan to do.”

“There must be a huge conspiracy behind all this,” Zhong Xie added.

Zeng Zhenzhen suddenly ran over, her face full of excitement. She pointed in the distance to a prison cell and frantically gestured towards Yan Ge.

Yan Ge unsealed her acupoint.

“My father and the others are over there!” Zheng Zhenzhen pointed in that direction. After being excited for so long, her initial excitement had somewhat subsided, and after whispering this to Yan Ge, she then ran off.

Yan Ge said, “I have some medical knowledge. If Master Pei doesn’t mind, can I take your pulse?”

Pei Jinde nodded and extended his hand, “Of course.” Luo Fang, Shu Shi, and Luo Jiaxing seemed to have emerged from nowhere. No one in the martial world knew much about them, which was truly strange. However, at present, he could only choose to trust them.

After carefully examining his pulse, Yan Ge’s face became enlightened, “I understand now.”

“Madam Luo, do you know what’s going on?” Huang Shuya asked nervously.

Yan Ge explained patiently, “You have been poisoned, but your inner strength is still there, just suppressed by the poison. I know that people in the martial world usually check for poison in food using silver needles, but this poison is an exception. It’s called ‘Ruo Shui,’ meaning it shares characteristics with water—colorless and tasteless, and it doesn’t react with silverware. Ruo Shui is made using a rare poisonous plant called Tilabu, which grows in the grassy swamps. It’s almost non-existent in Great Han, so it’s no wonder you weren’t aware of it.”

“Can it be cured?” someone asked eagerly.

“Of course, it can be cured. But I would need the necessary herbs to prepare the antidote, which will take long. The fastest way is to find the person who poisoned you and get the antidote from them,” Yan Ge replied.

Huang Shuya clasped her hands together, “Master Luo, Madam Luo, please help us as fellow citizens of Great Han Kingdom. We will be truly grateful.”

Yan Ge nodded, “We came all the way here to find you, of course, we will help. But, we haven’t obtained the antidote yet. Please be patient and stay here for the time being. If we release everyone now, it will raise suspicion.”

“Thank you!”

“Young Master,Madam!”

Gao Feng and Gao Yun hurried over with serious expressions.

“Speak,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

Gao Feng whispered, “ I found a stone room over there. Two people are sitting cross-legged on a stone bed, and the person behind has both palms pressed against the other person’s back, continuously absorbing their true qi. Apparently, that person hasn’t noticed our presence.”

“Is that so?” Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were astonished. Could it be that the purpose of the person behind all this is to absorb the inner strength of these martial artists?

“What’s going on?” Pei Jinde and the others asked on seeing their expressions change.

Yan Ge didn’t hide anything and explained truthfully.

Pei Jinde, Zhong Xie, and the others were all shocked. Inner strength was like half of a martial artist’s life; losing it would turn them into cripples.

The crowd became restless and urged Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen to release them immediately.

“Quiet!” Huangfu Yuchen’s voice was cold as he scanned the crowd with icy eyes.

The crowd fell silent but still resisted, glaring at him.

Yan Ge patiently explained, “Everyone, you won’t get far without the antidote even if we release you. If you still don’t believe me, then there’s nothing I can do to save you.”

Pei Jinde added, “I believe Master Luo and Madam Luo. As fellow citizens of Great Han, they won’t abandon us.”

Zeng Zhenzhen also ran over, “That’s right. I am the daughter of Yinshan Hall’s master. My father and my fellow brothers are also locked up here. I believe Master Luo and Madam Luo will find a way to save them.”

Some of the crowd recognized the master of Yinshan Hall, Zeng Shouli, as well as Zeng Zhenzhen, and gradually calmed down.

“Is there anyone else in this underground cave?” Huangfu Yuchen asked.

Gao Feng replied, “No, there are only those two people in there. Perhaps they think these people’s inner strength has already been sealed and isn’t a threat, so they haven’t sent others to monitor them.”

This speculation made sense. Yan Ge said, “Although we haven’t had the chance to ask, someone must regularly bring food for all of you, right?”

Pei Jinde nodded, “Exactly. Every two hours or so, someone brings food for us. The food is good, and there is no deliberate mistreatment. It has been over an hour since the last meal.”

Yan Ge thought for a moment and said, “Then, we’ll wait until the next mealtime. We’ll hide nearby and track them after the food is delivered to see if we can gain anything. If we don’t find anything, we’ll come back and subdue the person absorbing inner strength to force them to reveal the location of the antidote.”

“Okay,” Pei Jinde said, “we’ll rely on you for this.”

Zhong Xie looked around and said, “The underground space is all visible; there’s probably nowhere to hide.”

Gao Feng smiled, “Master, I have a solution.”

Saying that, he took out an extremely fine iron wire from his sleeve and tinkered with the lock of a cell. The lock immediately opened.

Yan Ge praised him, “Well done. We’ll hide among the others for now.”

In the enclosed space with over 800 people, the smell wasn’t pleasant. Huangfu Yuchen hesitated for a moment before following Yan Ge inside.

Yan Jin, being small, hid behind the crowd. With Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen coming in, it was unlikely that they meant any harm. No one suspected them of having ill intentions and cooperated to cover for them.

After waiting for about two incense sticks’ time, the sound of approaching footsteps became audible.

Everyone in the cells sat quietly, pretending to be dispirited as the approaching group drew near.

Dozens of people pushing carts came closer, each cart containing a large bucket of rice, a large bucket of dishes, and a barrel of chopsticks.

Mealtime clearly had a time limit, and everyone ate quickly.

During the wait, the food-delivery people stood motionless and silent, it was evident that they were well-trained.

Huangfu Yuchen became more and more suspicious of what sinister plot the mastermind behind all this might have.

After everyone finished eating, the food-delivery people collected the bowls and chopsticks and left with the carts.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen quickly followed them.

“I’m coming too,” Zeng Zhenzhen hurriedly caught up.

Yan Ge didn’t object.

The others noticed that even Yan Jin, a young child, walked without making any sound, and they were secretly amazed by the profoundness of his inner strength in that he could completely conceal his footsteps.

The group followed the food-delivery people for about thirty steps and saw one of them press a spot on the wall. Surprisingly, a hidden door appeared in the solid wall. The food-delivery people orderly pushed the carts through the hidden door.

After walking for nearly two incense sticks’ time, they finally saw them open another stone door, revealing sunlight streaming in from above.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen exchanged a glance, realizing they had reached the end. Yan Ge gave Gao Feng, Gao Yun, and Zeng Zhenzhen a look, urging them to be careful.

The three of them nodded In understanding.

As they approached the stone door, they distinctly heard the clamor of swords and blades clashing, as if many people were engaged in combat, but there were no screams. It seemed more like a sparring session.

Huangfu Yuchen’s brows slightly furrowed.

“What’s wrong?” Yan Ge mouthed.

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “These people have profound inner strength, but their moves are stiff and not at all in sync with their inner strength.” As a cultivator, he easily sensed this incongruity with his heightened senses.

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“Could it be that they suddenly gained their inner strength?” Yan Ge’s mind raced, “Similar to the person in the stone chamber, they absorbed other people’s inner strength?”

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “That possibility cannot be ruled out. It might be related to their physique. Mai Kingdom’s people have a much harder time cultivating inner strength compared to our people of Great Han. There are very few martial arts experts in their kingdom, and only those with exceptional talents can cultivate profound inner strength.”

Having said that, he released his spiritual consciousness and noticed the military camp aura from the people on the ground. His expression turned cold.

“There are fifty-six people in total. Try to capture them alive,” Huangfu Yuchen commanded.

Yan Ge and the others nodded.

Yan Ge said to Zeng Zhenzhen, “Miss Zeng, please stay here and keep watch over Jiacheng for us.” He and Huangfu Yuchen were hiding their true martial arts abilities from Zeng Zhenzhen.

Previously, Zeng Zhenzhen had been focused on saving her relatives, and afterward, she was engrossed in finding the antidote, completely oblivious to Yan Jin’s inner strength. She replied, “Okay, please find the antidote. Thank you!”

“Don’t worry,” Yan Ge reassured her.

As the food-delivery people gradually entered the stone door, the carts stopped at the edge of the underground passage, and they ascended the steps.

When the last person went up, Gao Feng quietly moved forward, holding the person's head and simultaneously sealing his acupoints before dragging him back into the underground passage and quickly ending his life.

Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, Gao Yun, and Gao Feng then leaped up to the entrance.

In the courtyard, people were sparring with swords and blades. They were taken aback when they saw strangers suddenly appear there. With a fierce look on their faces, they immediately gathered around.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen's cultivation had reached an extraordinary level. Their figures moved swiftly within the crowd, silver lights flashing in succession. The soldiers dressed as ordinary people from the Mai Kingdom all turned into motionless statues.

The two of them left around ten soldiers for Gao Feng and Gao Yun to deal with. Meanwhile, they flew towards the main building, where they subdued everyone inside, including servants and kitchen staff. There was also a pale-faced man with an aura resembling that of a eunuch. He had formidable martial skills and flew out of the room, attacking Huangfu Yuchen. However, Huangfu Yuchen used his immobilization technique to stop him in his tracks.

Back at the courtyard, Gao Feng and Gao Yun were dealing with the last three soldiers.

Although these soldiers had decent inner strength, it wasn't truly their own, so they couldn't use it proficiently. They were quickly immobilized.

"Be vigilant," Huangfu Yuchen instructed Gao Feng and Gao Yun.

"Yes, master!"

Huangfu Yuchen asked the person closest to him, “Where is the antidote for those people down there?”

The person remained silent.

Huangfu Yuchen didn’t say a word, but with a wave of his hand, a blood mark appeared on the person’s neck, instantly ending his life.

The rest of the soldiers looked on in horror, completely chilled to the bone. A demon! A heartless killer!

“I have plenty of time.” Huangfu Yuchen said lightly, and walked up to the second soldier, “Do you need me to ask again?”

“No, I don’t know…”

Huangfu Yuchen waved his hand, and another soldier fell down.

Huangfu Yuchen stood in place, looking indifferent as he gazed at the third person.

The man’s legs trembled, and he suddenly wet his pants in fear. His lips quivered uncontrollably, “We really don’t know, only the captain knows.”

As soon as this was said, one of the immobilized individuals’ expressions changed, but he quickly pretended to act nonchalant, hoping Huangfu Yuchen wouldn’t notice. However, before he could even blink, Huangfu Yuchen appeared in front of him.

He widened his eyes in terror. If not for being immobilized, he would have likely fallen to the ground.

“I-I’ll tell you! It’s, it’s in Master Zhuo’s room, in the drawer!”

“Where is his room?” Yan Ge didn’t ask who Master Zhuo was. Regardless of Master Zhuo’s identity, he and Huangfu Yuchen had likely already taken control of him within this mansion.

The man replied, “In, in… It’s in the main building, the master’s room.”

Yan Ge grinned, “I should remind you that I understand medicine. If I find that what we retrieve is not the antidote for ‘Ruo Shui,’ I will give you an opportunity to write your last words, and your family can offer incense to you on this day next year. By the way, does Mai Kingdom have a custom of offering incense?”

Huangfu Yuchen smiled; his beloved always managed to make him smile no matter the circumstance. “Yes, they do.”

Upon hearing that Yan Ge even knew about “Ruo Shui,” the man turned pale and stammered, “I’m not lying, it’s, it’s the antidote!”

Yan Ge flew away with a smile. After a while, he returned carrying the entire drawer, which neatly contained dozens of medicine bottles.

“I’ve checked them, and they are indeed the antidotes,” Yan Ge said. Since the soldiers needed to take the antidote before absorbing inner strength, a sufficient amount of the antidote was necessary.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, then waved both palms, and all the people in the courtyard died.

After ensuring that there were no survivors, the four of them took the antidote and returned to the underground passage.

Zeng Zhenzhen was anxiously walking back and forth. Yan Jin held a snack bag in his left hand and kept feeding himself the small snacks from inside, looking quite at ease.

“You’re back!”

Seeing them appear, Zeng Zhenzhen hurriedly approached, nearly tripping on the uneven ground.

“Did you find the antidote?”

Yan Ge nodded.

“That’s great!” Zeng Zhenzhen was overjoyed and immediately became teary eyed.

The group returned to the cells and first dealt with the person who was absorbing inner strength in the stone chamber. Then, they distributed the antidote to the imprisoned martial artists.

With their inner strength restored, everyone came back to life and walked out of the cells. They tidied their clothes and approached Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, expressing their heartfelt gratitude.

“Master Luo, Madam Luo, and these two brothers and this young lady, thank you all for saving us. We are deeply grateful!”

“We were captured carelessly this time and had lost hope. The mastermind behind this could take down so many martial arts experts like us, so they must have the ability to erase all traces outside, making it impossible for anyone to find us. Unexpectedly, we were fortunate enough to be saved by all of you. As the saying goes, ‘A drop of water, a grateful spring.’ You saved our lives, which is a great favor. If you ever need the help of Yinshan Hall in the future, just ask, and we will be at your service!”

Zeng Shouli, the master of Yinshan Hall, was the first to express his gratitude.

The others also voiced their appreciation. Some were willing to pay a generous reward, while others expressed their indebtedness and offered to help Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen in any way they could. Some even invited them to visit their sects to show their gratitude, and so on.

Yan Ge knew that Huangfu Yuchen had personally come to save these people for a reason, but he didn’t speak up.

As expected, Huangfu Yuchen said, “There’s no need for any reward. I only hope that everyone will report their names. If you ever come across this jade pendant in the future, I hope you can do me a favor.”

All eyes turned to the jade pendant Huangfu Yuchen took out. At a glance, they could tell it was no ordinary item. However, Huangfu Yuchen's words made them feel a bit doubtful and cautious.

Huangfu Yuchen calmly said, "Of course, this favor won't violate the rules of the martial world, nor will it compromise your conscience. And you're still free to refuse at the time."

In hearing this, they felt reassured. Most of them were prominent figures in the martial world, and they believed that if Huangfu Yuchen had ulterior motives, their sects were more than capable of dealing with him. Once they thought about it this way, their worries lessened, and they wholeheartedly agreed.

Yan Ge finally spoke, "Zirui, this place is no longer safe. Let's leave here first and then discuss."

"Just a moment." A man in his fifties spoke up, "I am He Wanli, the head of the Kuaidao Sect. Master Luo, Madam Luo, may I ask where you followed those people to just now? We have suffered such a great humiliation, and if we don't avenge this, the hatred in our hearts will be hard to dispel."

Others echoed his sentiment.

"That's right, those people from the Mai Kingdom have gone too far. Do they think we people from Great Han are easy to bully?" Huang Shuya said indignantly.

Zhong Xie couldn't swallow this anger either. A wicked and sinister smile formed on his lips as he said, "Exactly! Now that our inner strength has been restored, let's settle the score with them."

Yan Ge quickly interjected, "Everyone, listen to me first."

The crowd quieted down.

Yan Ge continued, "We did discover something. Those people are actually soldiers from Mai Kingdom."

“What?” Everyone was surprised.

Yan Ge continued, “Therefore, we deduce that this matter is related to the Mai Kingdom court. Matters concerning the court should be handled by the court itself. Otherwise, if this escalates into a war between the two kingdoms, we will all become criminals.”

These martial artists were not just all about fighting and killing; they could also think seriously and understand the reasoning behind Yan Ge’s words. Besides, if they let the matter escalate and attracted the attention of Mai Kingdom’s army, it would still be challenging for them to escape unscathed, despite their many experts.

“Does that mean we can only let it go like this?” A young female martial artist felt very unwilling. As an unmarried young lady who was also quite beautiful, she was usually the beloved child of her sect. However, not only had she been staying with so many grown men for so long, even going to the restroom meant entering a rudimentary little partition in full view of everyone. This was a great humiliation for her.

Her anger resonated with the other female martial artists, and they looked at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen with dissatisfaction.

Zeng Zhenzhen was grateful to Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen and was eager to help them. Without thinking too much, she spoke, “Master Luo and Madam Luo were sent by General Cao. I believe the court won’t let this matter go so easily.”

“Oh?” The crowd was surprised; they hadn’t expected these two to have a connection with the court.

Zeng Zhenzhen thought they might not believe her, so she added, “It’s true. I lost contact with my father and several senior brothers and was very anxious. I had no one else to turn to, so I sought help from General Cao. I saw them leaving General Cao’s residence with my own eyes. They were secretly sent by General Cao to come to the Mai Kingdom and rescue all of you.”

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“Who is General Cao?” someone asked.

The person next to him explained, “General Cao is the overall commander of the stationed border troops in Xiguan Pass.”

The fact that this matter was related to the stationed border commander made it clear that this incident was sure to escalate, even for those who knew little about politics. With so many people from Great Han being manipulated and imprisoned by the Mai Kingdom, the court would surely lose face and not let this matter go easily. Thinking about this. Thinking of this, the emotions of the crowd finally calmed down.

“Since that’s the case, let’s leave first and discuss later,” He Wanli said.

Everyone had no objections.

After exiting the tunnel, everyone introduced themselves and left their names.

Only at this point did Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen notice that the head of the Luna Worshipping Sect and his disciples were also among them. Both sides nodded to each other.

The others expressed their gratitude to Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen once again, and then they dispersed, each finding a place to buy horses and returning to their respective places.

Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, Yan Jin, Gao Feng, Gao Yun, and a few others, along with Zeng Shouli and his disciples, all returned to Xiguan Pass together.

Yan Ge sent a message to Huangfu Yuchen, “Zirui, I don’t understand. Why did you kill everyone instead of leaving anyone alive to interrogate? Aren’t you curious about what’s going on?”

“No need to interrogate; this is Hu Mailong’s conspiracy,” Huangfu Yuchen said. “There was a leader who should have known something among the people I killed but I had to kill him with a single strike, so as not to leave any traces of interrogation. It’s not the right time to confront the Mai Kingdom openly. We have to remain silent temporarily to avoid alerting the enemy. Besides, almost all of the people were killed with just one move from the two of us. Just this fact alone will give Hu Mailong nightmares every night.”

“I see.” Although Yan Ge felt a bit aggrieved, he understood that their kingdom was currently in a period of rapid development. If they really went to war with the Mai Kingdom, all their previous efforts would be in vain.

Seeing Yan Ge’s slight dissatisfaction, Huangfu Yuchen knew what he was thinking. He swiftly moved to his back and rode on the same horse as him, paying no attention to the gazes of Zeng Shouli and his disciples.

“Baby, don’t be unhappy. I promise to give you a chance to vent your anger. And this opportunity will come soon,” Huangfu Yuchen hugged Yan Ge and lightly kissed his cheek, then kissed the corner of his mouth.

“Really?” Yan Ge’s mood improved a little.

“When have I ever deceived you?” Huangfu Yuchen relaxed against his back. “Hu Mailong knows that our kingdom will become stronger and stronger, but he doesn’t dare to start a war with us lightly. He will act from other angles. This plan failed, so he will take action again soon. Then, we will seize the opportunity and deal him a heavy blow. As long as we can make him behave for two or three years, our kingdom would even stronger by then. If you like, I’ll bring the Mai Kingdom down and give it to you as a gift. How about that?”

Yan Ge chuckled, “No need for that. A gift that big would be too tiring to carry.”

“Don’t worry; I’ll carry it for you.” Huangfu Yuchen looked at the bright and charming smile on his baby’s face from the side. He couldn’t help but want to hold him and kiss him. But with the others around, it was inconvenient.

“Should we go directly back to the capital after returning to Xiguan Pass?” Yan Ge felt Huangfu Yuchen’s restlessness and gave him a warning look.

Huangfu Yuchen moved away a little regretfully. “We can play a few more days if you want, and we’ll go back when you feel like it.”

Yan Ge said, “Let’s play a few more days and then go back. There will be many things to take care of when we return.”

Huangfu Yuchen tightly hugged him and sighed gently, “Baby, you’ve worked hard these years. Give me five more years, and I promise, within five years at most, we will be free from the palace’s cage. By then, Yunxi will have grown up and can shoulder his responsibilities. Wherever you want to go, I’ll take you there. I want to make you happy every day, without worries.”

Yan Ge was surprised and turned to look at him, “Five years? Yunxi will only be thirteen by then. Are you planning to abdicate and pass the throne to him so early?”

“What’s wrong with thirteen?” Huangfu Yuchen didn’t think it was a big deal. “I took the throne at thirteen as well. Baby, don’t always spoil him.”

‘Why did he sound so sour?’ Yan Ge said helplessly, “What nonsense are you talking about? When the time comes, Yunxi can try to rule temporarily, we can’t actually pass the throne to him. Thirteen is still too young.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s face turned dark, “But…”

Yan Ge quickly pacified him, “I’m thinking about the best interests of Great Han. How about this, when the time comes, we divide the year into three parts. You and Yunxi manage the kingdom together for four months, Yunxi

manages it alone for four months, and we travel together for four months. How does that sound?”

“That’s not bad,” Huangfu Yuchen was finally pleased.

Yan Ge glanced at him with a smile.

This look was like a little cat scratching Huangfu Yuchen’s heart. He covered Yan Ge’s face with his hand and turned his head forward.

Yan Ge felt puzzled and wanted to turn back, “What are you doing?”

“Baby, if you look at me like you did just now, I’ll have to punish you right here,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

Yan Ge used his elbow to nudge him firmly, “Go back to your own horse.”

Huangfu Yuchen didn’t move, lying on his shoulder, “I’m tired. Let me rest here for a while.”

Zeng Zhenzhen and Yan Jin were riding together on one horse. Looking at the affection between Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, Zeng Zhenzhen said enviously, “Little Jiacheng, your fathers have such a good relationship.”

Yan Jin asked playfully, “Sister, are you envious of my papa or my father?”

Zeng Zhenzhen blushed and whispered, “Don’t talk nonsense.” With both of them being so outstanding in appearance and temperament, it was hard not to be moved. She liked Yan Ge more and if Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen weren’t married, she might have actively pursued Yan Ge. But she was sensible, so her fondness for Yan Ge was more of an admiration.

Besides, seeing Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen being so affectionate and understanding of each other all the way, she found it sweet and would never think of breaking them apart.

After a few hours of traveling, the group took a short rest under the shade of trees by the roadside.

Yan Ge occupied the most solid and shady spot under a tree. Although he wasn’t afraid of the heat, he didn’t enjoy being scorched by the sun.

Once he sat down, he didn’t want to move. He fanned himself with a fan, and felt quite relaxed.

Huangfu Yuchen sat down next to him and held both him and the fan, quickly condensing his true qi to form a thin layer of ice on the fan. As Yan Ge fanned, a refreshing breeze swept through, providing an even cooler sensation.

Yan Ge smiled at Huangfu Yuchen in appreciation and continued fanning the two of them.

Zeng Zhenzhen couldn’t help but exclaim in admiration. ‘Master Luo really spoils his wife, he uses his true qi just to cool him down!’

Yan Jin ran over and squatted down, feeding a piece of beef jerky into Yan Ge’s mouth, then handing another piece to Huangfu Yuchen, smiling as he looked at the latter expectantly.

Yan Ge fanned Yan Jin a few times and gave Huangfu Yuchen a threatening look. Huangfu Yuchen reluctantly opened his mouth and ate the beef jerky.

The warmth and sweetness of the family of three were truly enviable.

Zeng Shouli walked over, cupped his fists, and said, “Young Master Luo, Madam Luo.”

“Master Zeng Shouli, you don’t need to be so formal. Please sit,” Yan Ge didn’t want to get up and made a hand gesture as an invitation.

Zeng Shouli didn’t feel disrespected in the slightest; instead, he admired Yan Ge’s straightforwardness and laughed heartily, then sat down on the ground nearby.

Zeng Zhenzhen and the several disciples of Zeng Shouli couldn’t believe their eyes. Was this their rule-abiding and image-conscious master?

Zeng Shouli said, “I heard from my little girl that Young Master Luo and Madam Luo arrived at Xiguan Pass not long ago, so I assume you won’t leave immediately. I wonder if I could invite you to Yingshan Hall to show my gratitude.”

Huangfu Yuchen simply said, “My wife makes the decisions.”

Zeng Zhenzhen liked Yan Jin very much, and she was afraid Yan Ge would decline, so she enthusiastically joined the invitation, “Madam Luo, come with us. Yingshan Hall is surrounded by trees, and it’s very cool. It would be nice just to go and escape the summer heat.”

The more friends, the more options. Yan Ge nodded with a smile, “Since Master Zeng has invited us, we shall gladly accept.”

That’s great.” Zeng Shouli was overjoyed. “My grandson is the same age as the Little Master, and I believe they will have fun together.”

After a few hours of rest, the group continued their journey.

They returned to Xiguan Pass smoothly, and Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen arranged to visit the Yinshan Hall the next day. Zeng Shouli led Zeng Zhenzhen and dozens of disciples back to the Yinshan Hall.

Yan Ge asked Gao Feng to go to the inn and report their safety to his brother. He and Huangfu Yuchen returned to the General’s Mansion to freshen up.

Naturally, the conditions at the General’s Mansion were not as good as the palace, and they could only bathe in a wooden tub.

However, for Huangfu Yuchen, a wooden tub had its own advantages.

While Yan Ge was using a cloth to pour water over himself, someone suddenly entered from behind, causing a splash that soaked the floor.

“You’re squeezing me.”

“I’ll hold you so there won’t be any squeezing,” Huangfu Yuchen said, and without waiting for Yan Ge’s response, he wrapped his arms around Yan Ge’s waist and lifted him up, placing him on his lap.

Yan Ge guessed what he intended to do and his face turned hot. “Don’t be reckless; it’s still broad daylight.”

“No one would dare to barge in,” Huangfu Yuchen held him tightly.

The two wrestled in the wooden tub for awhile, and only when Huangfu Yuchen was satisfied did he skillfully use the cloth to help Yan Ge wash his back and hair. “All done, baby.”

“Um, I’ll go out first,” Yan Ge stood up, but Huangfu Yuchen couldn’t resist leaning over and kissing him while pushing him back into the tub.

Just as they were kissing, they suddenly felt a lightness beneath them. Huangfu Yuchen quickly hugged Yan Ge tightly, and in the next moment, they heard a “splash” – the tub had cracked.

“Are you satisfied? Now everyone knows what we were doing just now,” Yan Ge looked at Huangfu Yuchen with a sidelong glance.

Huangfu Yuchen looked at the water on the floor and the broken wooden tub. He raised his hand and, with another “splash,” his own tub also cracked.

Yan Ge’s mouth twitched. This was really… creative.

The attendants in the courtyard were alarmed by the commotion and rushed over, fearing that something had happened to the esteemed guests. They knocked on the door, “Master Luo, Madam Luo, are you alright?”

After a moment, the door opened.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen walked out gracefully.

“We’re fine,” Yan Ge said matter-of-factly, “Tell your general that even when saving money to marry a wife, you can’t be too frugal. Aren’t these

tubs too cheap? Cheap goods are not good."

With that, he confidently pulled Huangfu Yuchen along and left.

Several attendants looked at each other. 'Cheap? The steward had said that the tub was specifically purchased for Master Luo and Madam Luo, and it was bought from the best woodcraft store in the city for 15 silver taels each.'

When they returned to the inn, Yan Ge still had an amused expression on his face.

Yan Su who was holding Yan Xiangtian amd waiting by the door couldn't help but ask, "Is there something good that happened?"

Yan Ge quickly denied, "Nothing. Tiantian, do you miss your uncle?" He then lifted Yan Xiangtian into his arms.

"I do," Yan Xiangtian smacked Yan Ge's face with a kiss.

Huangfu Yuchen lightly patted Yan Ge's face as if unconsciously, using his sleeve to wipe away the saliva. Yan Su couldn't help but smile to himself. "Both of you, please come in."

They sat down in the room, and Yan Ge said to Yan Su, "Big Brother, we'll stay in Xiguan Pass for two more days before heading back to the capital."

Yan Su had long guessed that they wouldn't stay for long. As the ruler of a country, Huangfu Yuchen had his hands full, not to mention his second brother who was busy helping Great Han develop its economy and military strength. Although he was reluctant to part with Yan Xiangtian, just having the chance to see his son already made him luckier than many people in the military camp.

"Understood, I'll spend the next two days with Tiantian," Yan Su replied.

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Zeng Shouli attached great importance to Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. Not only did he send someone to pick them up, but it was also his eldest son, Zeng Xuyang.

Zeng Zhenzhen also came along and ran over to Yan Jin to give him a hug as soon as she saw him.

Yan Jin seemed to be trying the aloof route today. With a straight face, he nodded faintly, “Miss Zeng is polite.”

After a moment’s surprise, Zeng Zhenzhen burst into laughter.

Yan Jin glanced at her helplessly and continued to walk with his hands behind his back, maintaining an expressionless face.

Zeng Zhenzhen saw that he was playing around and intentionally tried to make him laugh. Yan Jin had no choice but to quicken his pace, and Zeng Zhenzhen chased after him. The two of them walked faster and faster.

Zeng Xuyang shook his head helplessly, “Master Luo, Madam Luo, my younger sister has always been playful. Please don’t be offended.”

“No worries,” Yan Ge said, “I can tell that Little Jiacheng really likes your younger sister.”

Yinshan Hall was situated halfway up the mountain, surrounded by trees, with a soothing greenery. The cool breeze on the mountain was indeed very pleasant.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen walked side by side, chatting and admiring the scenery along the way.

Having received instructions from his father, Zeng Xuyang gave up on introducing them to Yinshan Hall. Instead, he led the way in front without interfering.

A servant walked at the back, carrying gifts.

As they stepped onto the final flight of steps, Zeng Shouli personally welcomed them.

“Ourhonored guests have arrived, and Yinshan Hall shines brightly,” he said.

Huangfu Yuchen only nodded casually. Zeng Shouli had long understood his character and didn’t mind.

Yan Ge smiled and said, “Master Zeng is overestimating us. We know very little about the martial world. Today, we have the opportunity to visit Yinshan Hall, which is our great honor.”

“Madam Luo is being too polite. Both of you, please come in,” Zeng Shouli said.

After they sat down in the reception hall, they chatted casually. Zeng Shouli had no airs of seniority and treated Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge with equal respect, just as the rumors suggested – he was warm and amiable.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen agreed to come to Yinshan Hall for another reason.

Huangfu Yuchen asked, “Master Zeng, do you know if there are any martial practitioners in the martial world willing to be hired as instructors?”

Zeng Shouli replied, “Naturally, there are. Some local wealthy families have hired several members of my sect to be instructors, teaching their children martial arts for self-defense.”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “I suppose such cases are rare in the martial world.”

Zeng Shouli thought for a moment and said, “Upon careful consideration, it does seem to be relatively rare. Most martial practitioners in the martial world prefer to roam freely rather than be tied down to one place.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded and didn’t say more.

Seeing that they didn’t want to discuss it further, Zeng Shouli tactfully refrained from asking more questions.

They shifted to other topics.

After having lunch at Yinshan Hall, Yan Ge and the others took their leave.

The next day, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen set off on their journey back to the capital. Unlike the hurried trip when leaving, this time they strolled leisurely. Huangfu Yuchen had arranged a different route, allowing Yan Ge to enjoy sightseeing along the way.

When they went back to the capital, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen once again immersed themselves in their busy schedules.

The Little Crown Prince was also not idle. As he grew older, Huangfu Yuchen’s demands on him became stricter, assigning him practical tasks on a regular basis. The Little Crown Prince understood that he was the sole heir to the throne, and he was very hardworking. Although his father was strict with him, the Second Master and Yan Jin treated him kindly, and he was content.

Time flew, and another month passed.

During the early morning court session, the ministers argued heatedly over state affairs. Huangfu Yuchen calmly read a memorial, waiting for them to finish their quarrel. Today was Yan Ge’s rest day, and he planned to take Yan Ge on a tour of the entire capital, so he needed to finish reviewing the memorials for the day as quickly as possible.

After arguing for a while, the ministers didn’t hear the emperor intervene, so they looked up and saw the emperor rapidly marking comments in red on

the memorials. They understood that the emperor must be eager to “meet” with Yan Guiqing.

“Your Majesty,” Deng Mande reminded.

Huangfu Yuchen didn’t raise his head, “Are you finished arguing? Just state your conclusions.”

Prime Minister Wen said, “Currently, our Great Han is developing rapidly, and it’s a time when we need unity between the monarch and county kings. But King Jun Wang is abusing his authority, oppressing the common people, knowingly violating the emperor’s will, and acting against him. Considering his past merits to the kingdom, he can be spared from capital punishment, but he can’t escape punishment for his actions. We believe he should be stripped of his title, demoted to a commoner, and have his wealth confiscated as a deterrent.”

“Understood. Do as Prime Minister Wen suggested,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

“Report—”

The voice of a eunuch announcing a report came from outside the hall.

Everyone in the hall straightened up. Normally, when memorials were submitted directly to the emperor, they were either urgent military reports or diplomatic letters from foreign kingdoms.

A eunuch came in with both hands holding a memorial and hurriedly entered the hall.

“Report to Your Majesty, a letter from the Wei kingdom court.”

“Present it.”

Deng Mande took the memorial and handed it to Huangfu Yuchen.

After reading it, Huangfu Yuchen snorted.

The ministers were curious. It wasn't often to see the emperor displaying such rich emotions while reading a memorial.

"Deng Mande, let all the esteemed ministers have a look," Huangfu Yuchen said.

"Yes." Deng Mande passed the memorial to the other ministers one by one.

"Demon Fortress? Your Majesty, do you know where this Demon Fortress is located?" After reading the memorial, Huangfu Yuhu handed it to Jiang Gan.

The ministers who hadn't seen it yet perked up their ears at the unfamiliar term. Their emperor was known for his wide knowledge and extensive learning.

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at Grand Tutor You calmly and said, "Grand Tutor must know."

You Tai held his tablet and said, "Reporting to Your Majesty, this old minister indeed knows a bit."

"Then, Grand Tutor, please enlighten the esteemed ministers," Huangfu Yuchen said.

You Tai said, "This old minister obeys the order. Demon Fortress is located in the Mai Kingdom and is said to be the residence of demons. To enter the Demon Fortress, one must first traverse an uninhabited desert, then cross a turbulent river, and finally pass through an endless jungle. The desert, river, and jungle are filled with poisonous insects and monsters, and danger lurks at every turn. For hundreds of years, a legend has circulated that the Demon Fortress houses numerous rare treasures, but because of the demons guarding them, anyone who ventured into the Demon Fortress never returned. Before the rise of the Hu Maichu nobles in the Mai Kingdom, almost every dynasty had dispatched armies to the Demon Fortress, attempting to find treasures for expanding their military funds, but none were successful."

Prime Minister Wei said, “The state letter mentions that each kingdom is to send a thousand elite troops to explore the Demon Fortress together. One, it’s to display their military strength and learn from each other, and two, it’s to search for treasures. Whichever kingdom’s troops arrive at the Demon Fortress first will be considered the victors, and the troops of other kingdoms will help them search for treasures. Once treasures are found, two-thirds of the treasures will belong to the victorious troops. The invitation to our Great Han comes from His Majesty Wei Lie. What is his intention?”

Jiang Gan said, “It’s obvious that the Wei Kingdom and Mai Kingdom are colluding. The reason they had the Wei Kingdom extend the invitation is merely to deceive and cover up their true intentions.”

The ministers whispered in discussion.

“I wonder what Your Majesty plans to do?” Jiang Gan asked.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “If we refuse, they’ll think we’re afraid of them.”

Jiang Gan nodded in agreement, “However, if what Grand Tutor said is true, there are various unheard-of poisonous insects and monsters in the jungle and desert. Sending a thousand soldiers might lead to casualties without any returns.”

After contemplating for a while, Huangfu Yuchen spoke again, “Rumors might not always be baseless. I once read an anonymous anecdote in an ancient record many years ago, which mentioned that a thousand years ago, the Demon Fortress was once the imperial palace of a small kingdom. Coincidentally, in another book called ‘Ancient Legends,’ I read about the same place, referred to as the Twin Moon Palace, it fell due to a battle between unknown forces. Therefore, I believe that the existence of treasures in the Demon Fortress might be true.”

Grand Tutor You nodded, “I’ve also read ‘Ancient Legends’ mentioned by His Majesty. It is an extremely ancient book written by someone with the surname ‘Gu.’ The book didn’t originally have a title, as it was customary

at that time not to sign one's name in writings. The author identified himself as 'Gu,' and later generations named the book 'Ancient Legends.'"

"That's right," Huangfu Yuchen affirmed.

The ministers were greatly impressed by the extensive knowledge of their emperor and the Grand Tutor.

Prime Minister Wei wasn't entirely in favor, "Your Majesty's intention is to accept the invitation?"

Huangfu Yuchen replied, "The assembly time mentioned in the state letter is still two months away. I will think it over first and discuss this matter tomorrow."

"Yes!"

Deng Mande announced, "Presenting a report, and adjourn if there are no other matters—"

"Long live, our Emperor!"

"Adjourn—"

Back in Tenglong Palace, Huangfu Yuchen went directly to Yang Ge's laboratory.

Yan Ge was busy studying the spiral bottle stopper on the experimental platform. The container's opening was made with threads to provide a higher level of sealing, which was good for preservation.

Seeing him occupied, Huangfu Yuchen didn't disturb him. He signaled to Deng Mande and quietly sat down at a nearby table.

Deng Mande handed him the memorials, then stood quietly beside him.

After verifying a set of data, Yan Ge turned around to record it on the table. Unexpectedly, he saw Huangfu Yuchen and was startled.

“When did you arrive?”

“Just now,” Huangfu Yuchen picked up a cup of cooled tea and warmed it using true qi. “Baby, have some water and take a break.”

“Mhm.” Yan Ge had something in his hands so he just took a big sip.

Huangfu Yuchen realized that Yan Ge had been busy for a while, and because the palace maids and eunuchs didn’t dare to disturb him, they hadn’t brought him water, leaving him thirsty until now. He felt distressed and fed him another sip.

“I’ve told you countless times to take care of yourself. If you don’t listen, I’ll have your laboratory closed.”

“I promise to pay attention next time. I want to drink more,” Yan Ge smiled at him.

Seeing his beloved’s smile, Huangfu Yuchen lost all his anger and continued to feed him the tea.

Having quenched his thirst, Yan Ge smiled contentedly, then went back to the table to finish recording the previous data.

Deng Mande thought ahead and asked a maid to prepare water for him to wash his hands after.

“Aren’t you still busy? Why did you come over?” Yan Ge asked as he washed his hands. He saw the open memorial on the table.

Huangfu Yuchen motioned for him to sit down, then personally fanned him with a folding fan, while telling him about the matter of the Demon Fortress.

“Hu Mailong is really dishonest!” Yan Ge said, “Since you think there might be treasures in the Demon Fortress, we should go and have a look. If possible, we’ll take all the treasures and let him suffer. Maybe the next ruler of the Mai Kingdom won’t be as ambitious as him, and it will save us a lot of trouble.”

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled; his beloved always looked at the bright side.

“That’s what I’m thinking too. However, there are many dangers on the way to the Demon Fortress, and having a thousand people might not be advantageous. On the other hand, there are also the so-called poisonous insects and ants. Baby, can you treat someone bitten by an unknown poisonous insect?”

“Of course!” Yan Ge was brimming with confidence. “The ‘Medicinal Pharmacopoeia” contains information about various poisonous insects and plants, as well as treatment methods after injuries. If I have time, I can prescribe appropriate remedies.”

Huangfu Yuchen loved seeing him so confident and couldn’t help but lean down and kiss him deeply. “Since that’s the case, let’s personally go and take a look. We’ll only take a hundred elite soldiers and travel lightly.”

Yan Ge nodded, he was also looking forward to the new adventure.

“I’ll start preparing some antidotes.”

Huangfu Yuchen stopped him, “There’s no need to rush. It will take some time for the large group to arrive. We won’t go with them. Instead, we’ll wait until the last few days of the deadline and fly there directly on our swords.”

“That works too,” Yan Ge agreed without objection.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “You rest obediently for now. Once I finish handling the last few memorials, I’ll take you out for a walk. I feel sorry for you being stuck in the palace all this time.”

“That sounds good.” Yan Ge stood up and hooked his arm around Huangfu Yuchen’s neck, giving him a deep kiss on the lips. “Hurry and finish your work. I’m going to take a bath.”

“Go ahead.” Huangfu Yuchen quickly reviewed the remaining memorials, hoping to join his beloved in the bath soon.

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“Ride—Ride—”

On the cement road leading to Xiguan Pass, a troop of soldiers galloped forward on spirited horses. There were about a hundred soldiers, all dressed in neat and concise camouflage uniforms, each carrying identical equipment bags on their horses. The lead horse had the flag of the Great Han Kingdom. The heavy sound of horse hooves striking the ground resembled a thunderous drumbeat. Passersby that were carrying loads on shoulder poles or pushing carts quickly made way for them upon hearing the commotion and seeing the flag. The cavalry thundered past, leaving a gust of wind in their wake.

The cavalry stopped at the entrance of Xiguan Pass. The guards saw the military flag and hurried over. “May I ask if you are the special forces headed to the Mai Kingdom?” asked the guard.

“Indeed,” replied Yang Zhuo. He also took out his identification card from his pocket and handed it over.

The guard looked at it and saw the general rank insignia. He quickly said, “So it’s General Yang. Please pardon my lack of insight. Everyone, please follow me into the city. General Cao has already arranged accommodations for you all.”

“Alright, lead the way.”

The group of soldiers entered the city at a steady pace to avoid causing any disturbances among the common people.

Wei Hao rode up to Yang Zhuo and asked, “General Yang, aren’t we going directly to the Mai Kingdom?”

Yang Zhuo explained, “We still have plenty of time before the deadline. Let’s wait here at Xiguan Pass for the other two team leaders to arrive and also take the opportunity to rest.”

Wei Hao, Zhou Zheng, and the others exchanged puzzled glances.

“We always thought you were the team leader,” said Wei Hao.

Yang Zhuo smiled and didn’t say much. “You’ll know when the time comes.”

Wei Hao and the others were still confused, but they didn’t dwell on it. It was an arrangement made by the court, so there must be a reason for it.

Upon arriving at the designated military camp, the soldier leading them explained, “For your convenience, General Cao has set aside this camp specifically for you. Brothers, please rest assured and stay here. Three meals a day will be delivered to you.”

Yang Zhuo nodded, “I will visit General Cao after settling in. You may go now.”

“Yes, I’ll take my leave now.”

The special forces soldiers quickly washed up and almost immediately chose to lie down for a deep slumber. Resting would alleviate their travel fatigue and prepare them for the upcoming challenges.

Once Yang Zhuo had taken care of everything, he went to pay a visit to General Cao. Though they held the same rank, General Cao’s military accomplishments as a border defense commander far exceeded his. It was only appropriate to personally visit him.

After settling matters in the capital, Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge, accompanied by Yan Jin, Gao Feng, and Gao Yun, set off. They left the affairs of the court to Prince Dai, Grand Tutor You, Prime Minister Wen, Prime Minister Wu, and the six ministers.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun had the chance to fly on Huangfu Yuchenn's sword for the first time, and they were so thrilled that they almost fainted. They were both amazed by Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge's strength and marveled that there were such incredible powers in the world.

Meanwhile, Yan Ge flew comfortably and smoothly, with ups and downs that were effortless, as if he was having great fun. Gao Feng and Gao Yun were envious, but they didn't dare to ask Huangfu Yuchen to also fly like that.

After being in seclusion for so long, the Zhantian Vine was slowly regaining consciousness. By the time they reached the Mai Kingdom, they would have a formidable helper.

In just two days, the group had rushed from the capital to Xiguan Pass, arriving half a day later than the main army. They reached the city gate of Xiguan Pass just as it was opened in the morning.

On entering the city, they went straight for the general's mansion. Huangfu Yuchen changed into his imperial robe, while Yan Ge donned his Guiqing attire. Gao Feng and Gao Yun both wore camouflage uniforms, and even Yan Jin had his own tiny version of camouflage attire, looking cute and handsome.

Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge didn't intend to conceal their identities this time, for they had other plans in mind.

After having breakfast, they first visited the military camp to inspect and comfort the border defense soldiers. The border defense soldiers had already heard that the series of changes at Xiguan Pass were all due to the efforts of the Emperor and Yan Guiqing. Never in their wildest dreams did they expect the Emperor to personally visit Xiguan Pass, let alone bring the legendary Yan Guiqing along. Overwhelmed with emotions, they couldn't help but shout, "Long live the Emperor! Long live the Emperor!" and "Greetings to Yan Guiqing!"

The voices rose to the sky and resounded through the heavens.

Huangfu Yuchen delivered some encouraging words to boost their morale and then left the training ground. After all, reviewing the border defense troops was not his main purpose.

Wei Hao and his team were also in shock, never expecting the Emperor and Yan Guiqing to appear here. Remembering the vague words Yang Zhuo had said before, Wei Hao was even more astonished. Could it be that the two team leaders that Yang Zhuo mentioned were…

They were still in a daze when a soldier ran over.

“General Wei, the Emperor summons you all!”

Wei Hao and his group quickly rushed over.

Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge entered Yang Zhuo and the others’ temporary camp. They were having tea when all one hundred special forces soldiers entered one after another and knelt down in an orderly fashion.

“Kneeling before the Emperor, long live the Emperor!”

“Rise.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty!”

Huangfu Yuchen: “It is rumored that there are various monsters and venomous insects on the way to the Demon Island. You must have heard about it. I won’t let my one thousand elite soldiers take risks merely for a vague treasure. Therefore, I decided to send only one hundred soldiers to facilitate our actions. You were selected because you are the best among the elite soldiers, and I believe you will perform admirably. This time, you will go to the Demon Fortress with Yan Ge and myself leading the way. You need not worry about venomous insects or poisonous ants, as Yan Guiqing is skilled in medicine. If any accidents happen, he will personally treat you.”

The special forces soldiers were not only surprised and touched, but also relieved. They had already guessed that there would be a physician

accompanying them, but they never expected it to be Yan Guiqing. Moreover, the Emperor was leading them personally.

They knelt down again and said, “Your Majesty and Yan Guiqing’s considerate arrangements humble us. We will give our all to fulfill our mission and not disappoint you!”

“Rise.” Huangfu Yuchen said, “The one hundred soldiers will be divided into ten squads. Yang Zhuo, Lu Fei, Jun Xiang, Wei Hao, Zhou Zheng, Zhang Qiao, Huang Hui, Wang Qiang, Wang Yong, and Chen Feng, you will be cautious and serve as squad leaders. Yang Zhuo and Wei Hao will be in overall command.”

“Yes!”

Wei Hao, Zhou Zheng, and the others who were mentioned by name were surprised. They wondered how the Emperor knew they were more careful in nature.

“Xiao Ge, do you have anything to add?” Huangfu Yuchen asked Yan Ge while hugging his waist unabashedly.

Yan Ge motioned to Gao Feng, who opened the box in his hand.

“All squad leaders, step forward.”

“Yes!”

Yan Ge continued, “Take these medicine bottles and distribute one to each person. These are detoxification pills I refined, with ten pills in each bottle. If anyone is injured by venomous insects or snakes, don’t panic. Immediately take one detoxification pill to prevent the spread of the poison. This will enable me to treat you in time.”

“Yes! Thank you, Yan Guiqing!”

“I have nothing else to add,” Yan Ge looked at Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, “Rest well today, and assemble at the hour of Chen Shi tomorrow.”

“Yes! We bid farewell to Your Majesty and Yan Guiqing!”

Once Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge left, Wei Hao, Zhou Zheng, and the others exchanged glances.

“General Wei, don’t you feel that His Majesty and Yan Guiqing seem somewhat familiar?” Zhou Zheng asked.

Wei Hao silently nodded, feeling the same. He hesitated for a moment and said, “Based on my feelings alone, it’s as if they resemble Qin Xiaosha and Yu Xiaoyao from last time…”

“Not hiding anything from the two generals, I feel the same…” Zhang Qiao whispered, as if afraid to be heard.

The group exchanged surprised glances, then looked at Yang Zhuo, who remained calm.

Wei Hao tentatively asked, “General Yang, do you know about it?”

The incident from last time had passed, so there was no harm in telling them. Yang Zhuo nodded.

Wei Hao and the others’ faces changed drastically.

“We’re doomed…” Jeisen slumped on the bed, looking pale as a sheet. He then looked at the few who had gone on a mission with him last time and said with tears welling up, “I, I, I actually said…”

Zhou Zheng and the others looked at him in sympathy.

“What happened?” Yang Zhuo asked.

Seeing Jesien’s appearance, Wei Hao and the others didn’t feel right about reprimanding him further.

Yang Zhuo roughly guessed that Jeisen had said or done something wrong. He acted as if he didn't know and intentionally avoided probing further. He lay down on his own bed, closed his eyes to rest.

With a "thump," Jeisen knelt in front of him, knocking his head hard on the ground, and wailing, "General Yang, please show me the right path!"

Since Jeisen was selected for high-difficulty missions twice, he indeed had real abilities and a good heart. Wei Hao and the others also knelt down to plead for him.

Wei Hao said, "General Yang, the incident from last time was merely Jeisen's slip of the tongue. He didn't know the true identities of His Majesty and Yan Guiqing. Please consider…"

Yang Zhuo then opened his eyes, waved his hand, and said, "Enough, use your brains. Since His Majesty and Yan Guiqing haven't brought it up, and Jeisen was still selected this time, it means that His Majesty and Yan Guiqing don't intend to hold grudges. Otherwise, Jeisen, do you think you would still be here? If you're still worried, perform well this time and make up for your mistakes. Do you understand?"

After hearing Yang Zhuo's analysis, Jeisen and the others felt that his reasoning made sense. They heaved a sigh of relief, thanked Yang Zhuo, and stood up.

Jeisen wiped the sweat from his forehead and let out a long breath.

Yan Jin and Huangfu Yuchen were unaware of the minor disturbance in the military camp. They had long forgotten about the incident from last time, with so many tasks to handle every day; they wouldn't bother dwelling on such trivial matters. Moreover, Jeisen hadn't known their true identities back then, and men were prone to saying something rude without much thought.

The two returned to the general's mansion, changed back into regular clothes, and each meditated and cultivated as they waited for the appointed time to set off to the Mai Kingdom.

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At the hour of chen, Yang Zhuo assembled the team. Everyone was dressed neatly, holding their horses with their right hand and placing their equipment bags on the horses.

General Cao Zhan was also there to bid them farewell.

Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, Yan Jin, Gao Feng, and Gao Yun appeared next. Like the special forces, they were now dressed in camouflage uniforms.

As Yang Zhuo and the others were about to pay their respects, Huangfu Yuchen raised his hand to stop them. “No need for formalities. From today onwards, address me as ‘Boss,’ and Yan Guiqing as ‘Young Master.’”

“Yes!”

Huangfu Yuchen continued, “Everyone, do one final check of your equipment.”

“Yes!”

They all opened their equipment bags to inspect the contents. Because this mission might take some time, they each brought two sets of camouflage clothing. In addition to that, the bags contained dry rations—compressed biscuits. These were new products from the First Company, currently only supplied to the military and with a shelf life of two months. Two months was sufficient, and improvements could be made in the future. They also had canteens filled with water, made of iron with a special rust-resistant coating on the surface. The canteen mouth was threaded, ensuring it wouldn’t leak when tightened, and the lid was not easily dislodged. Moreover, the canteen was sturdy enough to be heated directly over a fire. The medical kit contained basic items such as disinfectant, gauze, small

scissors, a sewing kit, and even salt. Additionally, Yan Ge provided detox pills, waterproof clothing suitable for jungle operations, tents, and other essential items.

After confirming everything was in order, Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge playfully put on their disguises, but in truth, they used their transformation skills to change their appearances. Masks were uncomfortable and both disliked wearing them for too long.

“Mount your horses.”

The team officially set off, heading towards the Mai Kingdom.

Three days later, they arrived at the gathering point for representatives from other countries—Maeden, Wei, Mai, Youji, Mini, and other kingdoms . As mentioned in the royal letter, each kingdom sent a thousand elite soldiers, dressed in various uniforms, totaling nearly twenty thousand people, forming a vast expanse of human heads.

“The army of the Great Han Kingdom has arrived.” General Yilihan of the Mai Kingdom saw the flags of the Great Han Kingdom’s army and rode out to meet them.

The leaders of the other kingdoms also joined him.

“I am General Yilihan, the leader of the Mai Kingdom’s one-thousand-strong elite troops. Welcome to Mai Kingdom.”

Yang Zhuo, as the official leader, nodded in response. “Thank you, General Yilihan. I am Yang Zhuo, the leader of the team from the Great Han Kingdom.”

“General Yang, you are polite,” Yilihan glanced behind Yang Zhuo and paused, “Most of the other teams from various kingdoms have arrived. When will the rest of your team arrive?”

Yang Zhuo replied, “We only have 105 people. It may seem laughable, but our kingdom has been extremely busy lately, and after careful selection, we

could only muster over a hundred elite soldiers. However, General Yilihan, please don't underestimate our team. These hundred-plus individuals are all among the best in our military. Though our numbers are small, we will compete with all our might against everyone else!"

Yilihan's first impression was that the Great Han Kingdom was taking this mission lightly, but Yang Zhuo's last sentence dispelled that feeling. They had reached this point, and he could only accept the reality. He could not exclude the people of the Great Han Kingdom from this mission.

"Very well, then we shall wait and see. Haha… Let me introduce you. This is Bai Shaobai, the leader of the soldiers from the Wei Kingdom, and this is Fick, the leader of Mini Kingdom…"

Bai Shaobai, they had met during the New Dynasty Ceremony.

After the introductions, Yilihan continued, "Everyone, we will set off now and hopefully arrive at tonight's campsite before dark."

This was the Mai Kingdom, and Yilihan was familiar with the route. The others had no objections and mounted their horses, hurrying along the way.

Ten thousand men galloped across the grassland, creating a spectacular scene.

That night, the large group camped on the outskirts of a small town. Everyone replenished their supplies consumed during the journey, buying extra provisions to ensure they would have enough at the Demon Fortress. They also bought food from the town for their dinner, enough to feed an entire county.

The people from Great Han Kingdom were used to eating rice, so they paid a high price to buy some rice and cooked several large pots of rice. Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen would not treat themselves badly and had brought plenty of seasonings, making the dishes fragrant. The other special forces soldiers happily joined in.

Both Wei Kingdom and Mai Kingdom invited them to join the Demon Fortress exploration for their own hidden motives, so they wouldn't harm them before reaching the destination. Therefore, the Great Han's team slept soundly that night.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had separate tents, but due to limited space in their backpacks, they had no blankets, let alone quilts, so they slept on the ground. Yan Ge wasn't used to it and kept tossing and turning.

Huangfu Yuchen eventually hugged him to his chest, letting him lie on top and kissing his face and hands. Both his palms gently caressed Yan Ge's back.

Yan Ge's body gradually warmed up, and he unconsciously snuggled closer.

Both were tempted, but they knew it wasn't the right time.

Yan Ge stopped Huangfu Yuchen's advances, found his lips, gave him a gentle kiss, and slipped his tongue into his mouth. In an instant, it was firmly held, and their tongues intertwined passionately.

They kissed silently for a while before relieving a bit of their longing.

"Sleep well, baby. Sweet dreams," Huangfu Yuchen's hoarse voice was particularly evident in the darkness.

Yan Ge kissed his face again but couldn't tell where it landed precisely. Then he adjusted to a comfortable position, held Huangfu Yuchen's waist and soon fell asleep.

The next morning, at the crack of dawn, everyone woke up one by one, had breakfast, and continued their journey.

After three more days of travel, the group stopped.

Yilihan asked the representatives from each kingdom to come forward.

"Everyone, we are about to approach the Lash Desert. It will take us two days to cross it. This is the last place we can replenish water, so make sure

to fill your containers in time. Otherwise, it will be difficult to make it through the desert."

The message was passed down, and they bought water tanks carried by camels in the towns and villages. Everyone filled their canteens and water bags before continuing. About an hour later, they could already see what seemed like an endless desert.

Gao Yun glanced at Yan Ge with a hint of worry, "Boss, young master…"

Yan Ge reassured, "Don't worry, I have been taking care of Little Jin's physique. He will be fine."

Yan Jin smiled in cooperation and said to Gao Yun, "Thank you, Uncle Yun, for your concern. I'm doing well!"

Seeing Yan Jin's rosy complexion and no signs of fatigue, coupled with the abilities of His Majesty and Yan Guiqing, Gao Yun's worries eased.

Even before entering the desert, they could feel the dryness in the air and the scorching sun. Once inside the desert, the sensation intensified, and soon, almost everyone started sweating.

Perhaps the only fortunate thing was that the team from the Mai Kingdom had a guide, so they didn't have to worry about getting lost in the desert. Regarding this guide, everyone witnessed how Yilihan had to spend one hundred taels of gold just to get him to agree to lead the way. It was evident that the Demon Fortress held great terror in this guide's heart.

In the Great Han team, Yang Zhuo and Wei Hao took turns leading, while Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen followed closely behind them, ready to issue commands at any time.

Because their team stayed at the rear of the main force, following in the footsteps of others, they didn't need to worry too much about poisonous insects or monsters in the desert. Those creatures either attacked the people in front or were trampled or frightened away by the horses ahead, so there was no need for excessive concern.

However, just to be cautious, Huangfu Yuchen called Yang Zhuo over and said, “Spread the word and have everyone remain vigilant, guarding against any monsters or poisonous insects.”

“Yes!”

Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, and Yan Jin were the most relaxed among them. Yan Jin, in particular, seemed carefree. In the eyes of outsiders, he was just a child of eight or nine years old, and he didn’t need to worry about anything. He curiously looked around while in Yan Ge’s embrace and fell asleep when he felt tired.

Yilihan wasn’t a fool; he wouldn’t let his kingdom’s team lead the way all the time. The teams took turns leading every hour. Whichever kingdom’s team was at the forefront was responsible for protecting the guide.

The guide handed over one hundred taels of gold to his family before departure, appearing quite indifferent at the moment. It seemed he had already come to terms with the situation. Even if he died on the way to the Demon Fortress, his family would have one hundred taels of gold to live comfortably.

Soon, it was the Great Han team’s turn to lead. Yang Zhuo ordered a few soldiers to lead the way, while Wei Hao and others rode forward, discreetly protecting Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen in the middle.

Their team consisted of only a little over a hundred people, which made the soldiers from the Mai Kingdom and Wei kingdom following behind them feel quite uneasy.

To them, if there were monsters in the desert, these one hundred people wouldn’t be enough to fend them off. Yilihan and Bai Shaobai felt like their mission had already failed before it even began. However, at this point, they had no choice but to go on.

Yan Ge quickly noticed that their soldiers were drinking water more frequently than others. He furrowed his brows and reminded them, “Everyone, be mindful and try to conserve water.” Their military water

flasks could only hold about 2 liters of water at most, but they had to travel in the desert for two days. At this rate, the water wouldn't last. Before entering the desert, they rented camels in the village, and the camels carried several water tanks, but those were for emergencies and couldn't be used lightly.

"Yes!"

In fact, it's not surprising that their soldiers were drinking water more frequently than others. The Great Han had little desert terrain, and these soldiers have never stayed in a desert area before; they were not accustomed to it and couldn't resist the urge to drink water when they felt their throats were dry.

Not only the soldiers from the Great Han but also the soldiers from other kingdoms were facing the same situation.

The soldiers from the Mai kingdom were either deliberately taunting them or were genuinely accustomed to the desert environment; they all appeared quite relaxed.

Yan Ge couldn't help but complain silently, 'Were they also constructed like camels?'

At this moment, the front hooves of a horse for one of the solders suddenly sank a few inches into the sand. The horse was startled, and it neighed and arched its body. The special forces soldier reacted quickly. He tightly clamped the horse's belly, and held the reins firmly, pulling the horse back.

"What's going on?" Yang Zhuo asked cautiously.

The special forces soldier was a bit dismissive, "Report to the General, it's nothing. The horse's hoof sank."

The guide was a bit nervous, "Be careful; it might have stepped on some ant or insect nest."

As soon as he finished speaking, Yan Ge noticed a black, centipede-like creature with a crab-like shell emerging from the collapsed area where the horse had stepped. There were at least twenty to thirty of them— they had poked an unknown insect's nest!

"Be careful!"

The creatures crawled very fast, and the group couldn't react in time. One of them had already climbed up a horse's leg and must have bitten it. The horse suddenly reared up, let out a mournful cry, and collapsed to the ground, motionless.

The toxicity was so strong!

"Move away!" Yang Zhuo's face changed drastically.

At the same time, Wei Hao reprimanded the stunned special forces soldier, "Why are you still standing there? Run!"

The special forces soldier finally reacted, leaped off the horse, and rolled on the ground. While rolling, he drew his weapon and fiercely chopped at the sand. His knife skills were precise, and he cut one of the black creatures in half with a single blow, making it motionless.

The special forces soldiers had undergone rigorous training after all, so they quickly calmed down. The nearest few quickly lifted their knives and began to attack.

However, the creatures crawled fast and as soon as they sensed an attack, they burrowed into the sand and reemerged from another location moments later. The special soldiers couldn't deal with them for a while, and the horses were also panicking due to their frequent changes in commands.

"Not good!" Yang Zhuo saw that the situation was not good and shouted, "Protect the young master and the Boss! Charge through!"

The special forces soldiers immediately gave up confronting the creatures head-on and protected Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen along with them,

urging their horses to dash forward.

Wei Hao picked up the special forces soldier who had lost his horse and shared a horse with him.

“There are poisonous insects ahead; good luck, everyone!” Yang Zhuo warned the other teams at the back out of conscience, shouting as he ran away.

The troops from the Mai kingdom were closest and noticed something was amiss. They quickly avoided the creatures and spurred their horses to gallop away.

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The teams further back were unclear about what had happened in front, so they could only hurry along. Chaos and panic spread for a while. Fortunately, horses were faster than the black insects, and after about a quarter of rapid running, they finally escaped from the group of creatures. The relatively flat desert terrain prevented them from getting separated even during the chaos, and the scattered teams gradually regrouped.

Several leaders rode their horses to the front and asked Yang Zhuo what had happened. Yang Zhuo didn't hide anything and explained about the black venomous insects hiding beneath the desert.

The leaders were cautious and quickly summoned the respective accompanying physicians.

"Do any of you know what those insects are?" They asked the physicians.

The physicians looked panicked and ashamed. "This… They look like centipedes, but they have shells similar to crabs. We've never seen or heard of such strange creatures."

The team leaders were astonished. If these creatures could instantly poison a horse weighing hundreds of catties, wouldn't it be even easier to kill a person? Since they didn't know what those insects were, they had no idea how to treat the poison. If they encountered those venomous creatures again, their lives would be in jeopardy.

However, the special forces soldiers from the Great Han Kingdom showed no concern. If the Emperor and Yan Guiqing weren't worried, why should they be?

Yilihan and Bai Shaobai soon noticed the calmness of the Great Han Kingdom's troops.

Bai Shaobai recalled that he had forgotten to ask if Yang Zhuo's team's physician knew about these creatures. He turned to Yang Zhuo, "General Yang, we haven't consulted your physician about those insects."

Yang Zhuo pretended to be clueless and replied, "Oh, General Bai, I almost forgot. Physician Qin, do you know what they are?"

Yan Ge glanced at Bai Shaobai and thought, 'Clever; if you didn't ask, I wouldn't have bothered mentioning it.'

"Those insects are called 'Black Fleas'; they thrive in the desert and are extremely venomous. Once bitten, a person will be paralyzed and lose strength in the blink of an eye, followed by unconsciousness. If the antidote is not taken within 30 seconds, the poison will spread throughout the body, leading to certain death."

The other physicians looked at him in shock and admirration. They had never heard of, let alone seen, such strange creatures. They believed that this area was rarely explored, and as a result, these peculiar creatures didn't have a name. Turns out they are called "Black Fleas."

In truth, Yan Ge only knew about the Black Fleas because of the Pharmacopoeia. Fortunately, he and Huangfu Yuchen had come in person this time; otherwise, it was highly likely that the hundred elite soldiers would have all been wiped out.

When the special forces soldiers heard his words, they were even more grateful to the Emperor and Yan Guiqing.

Yilihan and Bai Shaobai exchanged glances and decided to pay more attention to Yan Ge.

Yilihan immediately asked for further details, sounding very polite, "May I ask, Physician Qin, how should a person who has been bitten by the Black Fleas be treated?"

“This…umm…” Yan Ge deliberately hesitated.

A slight smile appeared at the corners of Huangfu Yuchen’s mouth as he looked at Yan Ge with indulgence, not interrupting.

Yilihan saw Yan Ge’s reaction and was displeased. He turned to Yang Zhuo, “General Yang?” He wanted to apply pressure on Yan Ge through Yang Zhuo.

Unfortunately, he miscalculated.

Yang Zhuo sighed helplessly, “General Yilihan, I’m afraid you’re mistaken. Our Emperor was concerned about the dangers of this journey, which is why he sent the best physician to accompany us. Physician Qin is highly skilled, and even our Emperor trusts and values him greatly. I dare not make things difficult for him.”

Although Yilihan didn’t believe his words, the other physicians were not as skilled as this Physician Qin. They might need this arrogant person’s assistance during the journey, even if it meant parting with some gold. Thinking of this, Yilihan glared at the other physicians—a bunch of trash.

Enduring his frustration, he had no choice but to turn to Yan Ge again, speaking politely, “Physician Qin, the main purpose of this journey is to search for treasure. If we lose manpower, it will be a great loss for any kingdom. Your kingdom’s emperor has dispatched troops, indicating that he values this matter greatly. Therefore, we will still need your assistance along the way. Given the favor your emperor shows to you, I believe you wouldn’t want to disappoint him, right?”

Yan Ge rubbed his hands and said, “Well, I do like shiny things…”

Huangfu Yuchen’s lips curled with a deeper smile.

Yilihan, Bai Shaobai, and the others: “…”

Seeing that Yang Zhuo showed no intention of pleading for them, they each took out one hundred taels of gold and offered some flattering words.

Although they felt they had been taken advantage of, they couldn’t do anything about it. If they encountered any medical problems on the way to the Demon Fortress, they would still need this “Qin” person’s help. With this in mind Yilihan and the others felt slightly better.

Nonetheless, Yilihan deeply felt humiliated and vowed to make them pay when they reached their destination. Regardless of how much gold they gained, he would make sure they returned it obediently!

Yan Ge accepted the gold and said, “Black Fleas have a peculiar trait: once one of them bites a person, the others won’t bite that person again. So, if someone is bitten, they must stay still in the same spot to avoid the poison spreading too quickly. Then, silver needles can be used to seal the person’s acupoints, confining the poison to the bitten area. Until the antidote is taken, the person must avoid strenuous movements; otherwise, they’ll die. Once the antidote is ingested, the poison can be completely removed.”

Yilihan and Bai Shaobai finally looked relieved.

“No one in our team knows how to treat this poison. In case of an incident, we will have to rely on Physician Qin,” Bai Shaobai added.

Yan Ge nodded generously, “No problem. However, as you all know, we are traveling lightly this time, and I didn’t carry many medicinal materials. Besides, I am responsible for the safety of our own soldiers. So, except for the Generals, I can only use silver needles to seal the poison on the other people until we find the necessary medicinal herbs to treat them.”

This reasoning was both logical and reasonable. Yilihan and the others could not demand more; all they could do was ask their soldiers to be extremely careful.

To avoid unintentionally stepping on Black Fleas’ nests again and being chased, the leaders decided to proceed as fast as possible. Although this had its drawbacks, such as tiring the camels and horses and making them hot and in need of water, there was no better option.

The large group continued to travel at a fast pace for another two hours before stopping to rest.

To protect themselves from the Black Fleas and other strange insects, several physicians took out insect repellent powder and protected their troops.

Yan Ge had also prepared insect repellent, but his was not in powder form, but rather a paste.

Yan Jin curiously asked, “Papa, why is yours in paste form? I see others using powder.”

Yang Zhuo and the others were also curious.

Yan Ge smiled and explained, “The insect repellent paste I’ve made maintains its effectiveness for a longer time when kept at the right temperature. Even if the desert heat dries out the paste, it will condense into granules and won’t be blown away by the wind, allowing us to reuse it. The next time we use it, we just need to add some water and mix it.”

“I see.”

Everyone suddenly understood and admired Yan Ge’s intelligence and talent. After all, Yan Guiqing was from their Kingdom!

Huangfu Yuchen watched his beloved confidently command the soldiers to set up camp, then instructed them to dig small pits every two zhang (about six meters) to place the insect repellent paste in.

His gaze was so hot that Yan Ge’s back felt itchy.

He turned his head and glanced at Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled, took a water bottle and walked over, “Drink some water. Just tell them what to do.”

“I’m afraid they won’t be able to grasp the dose properly and waste the medicine.”

Huangfu Yuchen took an umbrella from Gao Feng, and used it to shield Yan Ge from the sun. Despite their profound cultivation, being roasted under the scorching sun for too long was uncomfortable.

Indeed, the desert was not a comfortable resting place and after resting for about two hours, Yilihan ordered them to continue on the journey.

It was now the other kingdoms' turn to lead, and the pressure on the Great Han Kingdom's team lessened.

They encountered the Black Flea again, but fortunately, their fast pace allowed them to escape without any injuries to the people or horses.

At dusk, the guide led them to set up camp on a small hill. Surprisingly, the small hill had a tree as thick as an adult's arm and as tall as an adult's shoulder. There were some scattered rocks around, big and small, and the ground was somewhat more solid.

"This is probably the only place in the entire desert with such big rocks. It's relatively safe to camp here."

Yilihan said, "Then let's camp here, and we'll continue our journey tomorrow morning,."

He arranged for someone to set up the guide's tent first and sprinkle insect repellent powder before managing his own troops.

The Great Han Kingdom's team was under Yang Zhuo's charge, and he dealt with everything. Huangfu Yuchen pulled Yan Ge to the hillside to watch the sunset. The rounded sunset had a clear outline, resembling a huge egg yolk, bathing the entire desert in golden light, as if it were paved with gold. The wind blew the fine sand in layers, like frozen waves.

"What a magnificent sight," Yan Ge couldn't help but praise, "The desert is so majestic, with boundless expanses. Under the setting sun, people's shadows stretch long over the flat ground."

“Great poem!” Huangfu Yuchen hugged Yan Ge’s shoulder playfully and teased, “Did you compose it yourself?”

Yan Ge didn’t have the nerve to say “Yes”. He replied, “That’s not important. What matters is that the desert sunset is really beautiful.”

Throughout the journey, Yilihan, Bai Shaobai, and others had already become suspicious of the relationship between Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. However, they didn’t dwell on it, nor did they have the time to do so, as they were already exhausted just from guarding against the Black Fleas.

By the side of the small hill, everyone was busy with their own tasks, making the surroundings unusually quiet for a moment.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen kept watching the sun set before returning to the others. The desert nights were cold, and after a simple dinner, everyone retreated to their tents to rest early.

The special forces soldiers had great trust in Yan Ge’s medical skills. Except for a few who took turns to keep watch, the rest of them quickly fell into deep sleep and slept soundly.

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Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen cherished their soldiers greatly. They secretly set up a simple formation, enclosing their small camp. If anyone or any beast triggered the formation, they would be alerted immediately.

After setting up the formation, both of them fell into a deep sleep.

Yilihan, Bai Shaobai, and the others had a larger team, so they had more people on night duty, taking turns to patrol around the camp.

In the middle of the night, the entire camp suddenly became noisy with intermittent sounds from a distance. Apparently, it was coming from members of another team.

Yan Ge was enjoying his sleep, and without opening his eyes, he lazily kicked Huangfu Yuchen, who was lying beside him, and asked in a daze, “Zirui, what’s going on…”

Huangfu Yuchen looked at Yan Ge’s foot that looked fair and tender in the dim light, grabbed it, and kissed it. The foot retracted from the sensitivity, and he lightly chuckled. He bit it playfully, and then let go. “Sleep well, I’ll go check it out.”

Yan Ge waited until Huangfu Yuchen left the tent before opening his eyes. He looked at his foot and wiggled his big toe; it was even hotter than the scorching desert during the day.

“Messing around with kisses… Thankfully, I washed my feet last night…” He muttered to himself. Unable to fall back asleep, he lay on the ground lazily, his two dark eyes fixed on the tent’s entrance.

The campfire outside was still burning, and the moving figures cast shadows on the tent, swaying back and forth.

Huangfu Yuchen emerged from the tent, and found that their soldiers were already awake. Gao Feng, Gao Yun, and two other special forces soldiers surrounded his and Yan Ge's tents from four directions. Their weapons were drawn, and they were on high alert. Yan Jin had also woken up, and was standing outside his tent, looking into the distance.

Huangfu Yuchen asked, "What's going on?"

"Father, there are strange creatures," Yan Jin rushed to answer.

Gao Feng added, "Reporting! Boss, those creatures came from the south. We don't know what kind of monsters they are, but the strange thing is, they don't seem to have aggressive intentions. They are gradually approaching us, and it might take them a while to attack us here. General Yang took two people to help."

"What are those things?" Huangfu Yuchen estimated they were some unknown species.

Gao Feng explained, "We're not sure for now. Those things look a lot like spiders, but even the smallest ones are as big as a nine-pound watermelon. They can also burrow into the sand. They are poisonous too; just listening to the commotion, they've already killed quite a number people."

As the noise drew closer, Huangfu Yuchen quietly lifted the formation. He, Yan Ge, and Yan Jin were knowledgeable about protective formations, but if they used it now, it would raise suspicions among the others. They could just rely on their strength to protect the special soldiers anyway.

Huangfu Yuchen looked into the distance. With his excellent night vision, he saw a black creature, similar to an arrow, springing up from the ground and pounce on a soldier, covering his face. Before the soldier could react, it spat out a thick white fluid, completely covering his face. The soldier desperately tried to wipe off the fluid with his hands, but it was in vain. After a moment, whether due to poison or suffocation, he slowly fell to the

ground, motionless. The creature crouched on his face, moving slightly, either eating or doing something else.

Indeed, this was an unheard-of creature. Huangfu Yuchen considered himself knowledgeable about various texts, but he couldn't recall the name of this creature.

"Boss!" Yang Zhuo, Ah Fei, and Jun Xiang rushed over quickly.

"What's the situation?" Huangfu Yuchen knew Yang Zhuo didn't actually go to help.

Yang Zhuo reported, "The thick fluid of these strange spiders is poisonous, but it seems to only cause paralysis. The three of us tried to kill one; they aren't too difficult to deal with as long as you don't get the sticky substance on you." That was the reason he took two people with him.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. "In that case, send half of the men to help." This way, the team leaders of other kingdoms wouldn't have anything to complain about.

"Yes!"

"Also, find a way to bring a creature's corpse here."

Yang Zhuo set off to fulfill the order.

Not long after, a special forces soldier carried a creature's corpse using a knife and carefully placed it on a rock to avoid its poisonous fluid from staining the sand, in case someone accidentally stepped on it.

Huangfu Yuchen then went into the tent and checked if Yan Ge was awake. As soon as he opened the tent, he was met with a pair of bright eyes.

He smiled as he entered the tent, lowered his head, and gave Yan Ge a kiss on the lips before asking, "Are you awake?"

Seeing his relaxed expression, Yan Ge knew they could handle the situation outside. "Did they bring one of the creatures?" he inquired.

“Yes,” Huangfu Yuchen replied as he gently brushed the stray hair away from Yan Ge’s face.

“In that case, let’s get up,” Yan Ge said as he sat up. Inadvertently, he glanced at his foot and remembered Huangfu Yuchen’s kiss. His toe itched for some unknown reason, and he gave Huangfu Yuchen a glare.

Huangfu Yuchen looked at him Innocently. “What’s wrong?”

“You kissed my foot and then you kissed my lips.”

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled, “I don’t mind your foot, why should you?”

Yan Ge rolled his eyes helplessly, put on his short boots, and pulled Huangfu Yuchen outside. He saw the creature’s corpse placed on a rock and was pleased.

Huangfu Yuchen knew Yan Ge well and immediately asked, “Is it full of treasures?”

“Yes!” Yan Ge said, “According to the ‘pharmacopeia,’ this creature is called Black Demon Spider. It looks like a spider but can spit a sticky fluid that causes paralysis. However, there is something inside its abdomen, similar to chicken eggs, that can be used in medicine. Quick, let those who have nothing to do dig out the things from the Black Demon Spider. It will be useful in the future.” With so many people around, he didn’t go into the details of the creature’s medicinal value.

Huangfu Yuchen gestured to Gao Yun, and the latter led a team of people over.

Although there were many Black Demon Spiders, they had many soldiers as well. After a few moments, they had killed over a hundred of them.

Except for Great Han, Mai, and Wei kingdoms, who camped to the north and suffered no losses, the other kingdoms had some casualties.

Everyone saw soldiers from Great Han slicing the backs of the Black Demon Spiders with knives to extract what looked like chicken eggs from

inside, and they wore disgusted expressions.

Yan Ge could clearly see everything and thought, ‘You’ll regret this in the future.’

The special forces soldiers worked quickly. After the other teams had finished cleaning up the camp, they had also extracted all the “eggs” from the Black Demon Spiders’ bodies. These things were flesh-colored and looked like soft, unripe chicken eggs. They were slightly sticky, and somewhat disgusting to look at.

“Baby, the temperature will rise after sunrise, and these things might start to smell.” Huangfu Yuchen reminded him.

Yan Ge didn’t care and said, “That’s exactly what I want them to do.”

Huangfu Yuchen: “…”

Yan Ge glanced at him with disdain, “Once you know their value, you won’t make that expression.”

Huangfu Yuchen was piqued with curiosity, “What are they used for?”

“You’ll find out later,” Yan Ge teased, instructing Gao Feng, “Put them in bags and expose them to the sun after sunrise until the smell is gone.”

“Understood.”

Since they had no bags, a few special soldiers emptied two equipment bags and packed all the “eggs” inside, leaving the bags open.

It was almost dawn by the time they finished these tasks.

The team quickly had breakfast and continued their journey.

Soon, they saw the sparkling water from a distance, and the jungle beyond the river. They all raised their whips and drove their horses forward at full speed.

Finally, they were about to leave the desert!

Yang Zhuo occasionally observed the guide's expression and saw that his solemn demeanor hadn't changed at all. So the journey ahead was probably difficult.

He made eye contact with Wei Hao, and one by one, the special forces soldiers passed on the information to the last person in their teams.

After a day of exposure to the sun, the "eggs" that Yan Ge had the men dig out had become as hard as small stones, and strangely, the smell had completely disappeared.

Yilihan tentatively asked Yan Ge about the purpose of these things, but Yan Ge dismissed him with just a few words, leaving him helpless.

Soon, the team arrived at the riverside.

Even Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen couldn't help but show surprised expressions.

This river was truly bizarre. As everyone knew, any river in the world, regardless of the terrain it intersected, had a transition zone. Even the oases in the desert had this characteristic. But this river was clearly defined, like a deliberately arranged boundary with the desert on one side and the forest on the other. Moreover, the river's water was pure black, flowing as if it were not water but ink.

The river was about fifteen to sixteen zhang wide, which was not particularly wide.

The guide said, "This river isn't wide or deep, but there's something in it." His face showed a trace of anxiety, but when asked what that "something" was, he had no clear answer.

From entering the desert until now, both Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had the feeling that this area was like something out of this world, it was unlike anything they had seen or known.

Bai Shaobai took out a long spear tied to his horse and had a soldier test the water’s depth.

The water only reached two-thirds of the spear’s length, roughly around an adult’s waist, indicating that it wasn’t very deep.

The team leaders all stared at the water’s surface cautiously, but after observing for a while, they didn’t find anything unusual.

At this moment, it was Wei Kingdom’s turn to lead the way.

Yilihan said to Bai Shaobai, “General Bai, why don’t you send a soldier to test the path?”

Bai Shaobai wasn’t one to be bullied easily, and he responded firmly, “This is Mai Kingdom’s territory. How can I take the lead? General Yilihan should go.”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen watched the spectacle from the sidelines. They weren’t in a hurry, after all.

Yilihan was helpless. He didn’t want to sacrifice his soldiers. He recalled how the Liao Kingdom had suffered significant losses and lost several horses when they encountered the Black Demon Spiders before, so he spent some money to buy two horses and had them driven into the river.

Everyone nervously watched the two horses.

Once the horses were in the water, it reached up to their bellies, causing them to hesitate slightly. However, there seemed to be nothing amiss in their demeanor. After a moment, they quietly walked to the other side of the river. Due to the rapid flow, their progress was slow, but they showed no signs of distress. After a while, the two horses reached the other side and silently bent down to graze on the grass.

Yilihan breathed a sigh of relief. “It should be fine.”

Bai Shaobai then commanded the soldiers to drive the horses into the river.

Yan Ge faintly felt that something was wrong, but after surveying the surroundings, he didn’t find anything.

With other kingdoms’ teams leading the way, Huangfu Yuchen wasn’t too worried. He noticed Yan Ge’s subtle movements and asked with concern, “What’s wrong, baby?”

“I feel like there’s something very wrong,” Yan Ge touched his chin.

Yan Jin let out a “huh”, and asked casually, “Papa, won’t the horses drink some water?”

“That’s it!” Yan Ge clapped his hands, “This water must be problematic! Otherwise, why wouldn’t these horses drink the water after walking in the desert for two days?”

Bai Shaobai’s expression changed suddenly.

Almost as soon as Yan Ge’s voice fell, several soldiers who had already entered the water screamed in pain, lifting their legs and feet out of the water.

Upon closer inspection, their legs were covered in densely packed red bugs that wriggled incessantly, a truly disgusting sight.

“Retreat quickly!” Bai Shaobai’s face turned pale as he instinctively gave the command.

The soldiers hurriedly pulled on the reins to go back, but it was already too late. The red bugs quickly devoured the flesh on their legs and feet, leaving only gleaming white bones. Several soldiers opened their mouths but couldn’t say anything before falling off their horses into the river. Soon, their bodies were covered by the red bugs. They turned into skeletons in the blink of an eye, sinking into the riverbed.

Many soldiers couldn’t help but vomit.

Even Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen’s faces turned pale, and they felt a chill run down their spines.

Gao Feng swiftly covered Yan Jin’s eyes.

“General, we can still turn back now,” the deputy leader of Youji Kingdom whispered to their leader.

The military’s morale was already wavering.

Yilihan raised his voice, “If you’re willing to give up the treasure, no one is stopping you.”

From his tone, it was clear that he still wanted to move on. Could it be that there really was treasure in the Demon Fortress? The group began to hesitate again.

Yilihan’s sharp eyes swept toward the river, and his eyes lit up. “Look! Those horses are perfectly fine!”

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After calming down, everyone carefully observed the horses standing in the river, and indeed, like the first two horses that crossed earlier, they showed no signs of anything unusual.

Everyone suddenly understood.

Could it be that as long as they don’t touch the water, they’ll be safe?

Yilihan instructed a soldier, “Try riding the horse down the river without getting wet.”

“Yes.” The soldier lifted his legs onto the horse’s back and rode the horse into the river.

Everyone watched him closely, subconsciously holding their breaths until he reached the other side safely before exhaling a sigh of relief.

“Just as I thought,” Yilihan said in a relaxed tone. “It seems those creatures only eat… human flesh.”

The memories of the soldiers being devoured by the creatures were brought back, and everyone’s faces turned pale.

Huangfu Yuchen looked at the dense jungle on the other side of the river. Each tree was thick and robust. He guessed that even if he extended his arms, he wouldn’t be able to touch both sides. Looking up, even the shortest trees were sixty to seventy feet tall.

“General Yang, there might be even more unpredictable dangers once we enter the jungle. It’s better to rest here and let the soldiers regain their strength,” he suggested.

Yang Zhuo nodded, “That makes sense. General Yilihan, General Bai, what do you think?”

Yilihan and the others had no objections.

Everyone rested, ate their rations, and remained vigilant against any potential threats from the sand-burrowing creatures.

After eating and resting, the teams checked their numbers again. The greatest loss was suffered by the Youji Kingdom, with over fifty soldiers falling victim to the Demon Spider’s attacks as they were the first to encounter them at the southernmost point. Overall, however, the losses for all teams were not too significant.

“Let’s continue.”

From now on, it was the Liao Kingdom’s turn to lead.

Wen Han, the leader of Liao Kingdom’s team proposed, “Since it won’t be easy to switch the order of teams within the jungle, how about we form five-person exploration teams from each kingdom to lead the way?”

The other team leaders weren’t foolish.

General Fik was the first to protest, “Before this, we took turns at the forefront. Why should we change the method now that it’s your turn?”

“That’s right,” Bai Shaobai agreed, “General Wen, it’s better to keep the soldiers together for easier management. What do you think?”

Wen Han’s plan was revealed, but he didn’t feel embarrassed and smiled, “Since you all think so, then from now on, Liao Kingdom will lead the way. If we discover the treasure first, you’ll be at a disadvantage.”

No one paid him any attention.

He then ordered his soldiers to cross the river. The guide was naturally protected by him.

All soldiers lifted their legs to avoid touching the water.

However, some were still careless.

“Ah, there are bugs!” A soldier felt a sudden pain on his thigh. Looking down, he saw his pants soaked with blood, and several red bugs had burrowed into his flesh.

It turned out that the soldiers’ close proximity to each other disrupted the water flow, splashing water onto the horses’ bellies. The bugs hid in the water.

As is known, horses have stirrups to support their legs and maintain balance. However, when crossing the river, they lifted both legs, making it difficult to maintain stability. The bitten soldier screamed in pain and instinctively stood up, accidentally bumping into the soldier beside him. One soldier fell off his horse to the left and hit the soldier on the left. Four or five soldiers fell into the river, screaming in agony.

Other soldiers were more cautious and managed not to be knocked down.

“Help!” The soldier closest to them grabbed the outstretched hand, but when he saw the red bugs crawling all over the man’s body, he panicked and let go. The soldier sank to the riverbed and quickly turned into a skeleton.

Wen Han had yet to cross the river, and upon seeing this, he understood what happened and urgently reprimanded the remaining soldiers, “Don’t get too close! Take your time crossing!”

Yilihan wore a somewhat amused smile, seemingly enjoying the misfortune of others.

Yang Zhuo frowned and said to Wei Hao, “Instruct them to separate when going down to the river later.”

“Yes!” Wei Hao conveyed the message, and the special forces reminded each other. This was no joke; if they got poisoned, Yan Guiqing could treat

them. But if insects burrowed into their flesh, even if it could be treated, remaining as just bones was terrifying.

“Zirui, let’s go and take a look.” Yan Ge looked towards the dense jungle on the opposite side of the river-he had an idea. Each tree in the forest was thick, and even with arms outstretched, they couldn’t completely envelope it. Looking up, the shortest tree was sixty to seventy feet tall.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen understood each other even without words. Just by looking into Yan Ge’s eyes, Huangfu Yuchen guessed his thoughts and curved his lips into a smile.

The two of them leaped from their horses and used the shoulder of a soldier who was crossing the river to land on the other side.

The soldier felt a gentle force on his shoulder and turned around in confusion.

Yilihan, Bai Shaobai, and several other leaders were puzzled, not understanding what Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were up to.

Yan Ge raised his head and looked at a large tree, walking towards it. “The river is about fifteen to sixteen zhang wide, and this tree is tall enough, it should be workable.”

“Mm.” Huangfu Yuchen nodded.

Yan Ge drew his spiritual sword and swung it at the bottom of the tree.

“Hey! General Yang, why don’t you control your men? Cutting down a tree is not that easy. What if the tree falls in the wrong direction and blocks our way?” Yilihan complained unhappily. He had thought of using trees as a bridge, but those trees were too thick. Even if they cut them down, it would be challenging to make them fall in the right direction.

Yang Zhuo acted as if he hadn’t heard. How could the Emperor and Yan Guiqing do something without certainty?

Just as the tree seemed to be falling, Huangfu Yuchen lifted his foot and kicked forcefully against the tree trunk. The thick tree immediately fell towards the side of the desert.

“Get out of the way quickly!” Yilihan was furious. He didn’t know if those two were doing this on purpose, but the tree fell exactly in the direction where his army was located.

The soldiers quickly urged their horses to run aside, and in a short while, the area was clear.

The big tree fell with a dull thud, cleverly creating a simple bridge across the river.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen walked back along the tree trunk with ease.

While everyone was satisfied with Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen’s intelligence, they were also amazed. This tree was so thick, weighing at least several thousand catties. Yet this man had managed to kick it over with just one foot. How much strength did that require!

Wen Han silently turned his head to look at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. If he had known earlier, he would have taken his time to cross the river.

But regrets were useless, and he ordered the soldiers who hadn’t crossed yet, “Cross over from the tree trunk.”

The soldiers crossed the river by stepping on the tree trunk, and simply led their horses as the horses had no problem walking in the water.

Huangfu Yuchen whispered to Yang Zhuo, “Have the soldiers place the detoxification pills in easily accessible locations.”

Yang Zhuo conveyed the order discreetly. Yan Guiqing’s amazing medical skills were now known to the others, who knew if the foreigners might covet the pills he gave them? It was better to be cautious.

The soldiers of Great Han deliberately waited until about half of the people had crossed before leading their horses into the river. The other kingdoms’

soldiers in front acted as the vanguard, while the soldiers behind formed their rearguard. It couldn’t have been better.

Yilihan also kept lingering behind. Only after Great Han’s soldiers had crossed did he order his troops to cross the river. For some reason, he felt it was safer to follow Great Han’s troops once inside the jungle. His gaze involuntarily shifted between Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

The Emperor of Great Han was really unpredictable. He had only sent a hundred men, giving the impression that he didn’t attach much importance to this treasure hunt. However, he sent such formidable experts, and one of them was an exceptional physician, it seemed he cared a lot about this mission. Otherwise, why send such a skilled physician when he knew they would encounter numerous poisonous creatures and monsters in the Demon Fortress? Wasn’t he worried that such an exceptional physician might perish on the journey? Furthermore, they even brought an eight or nine-year-old child, which was peculiar.

Unable to figure it out, he decided to stop pondering. Everything should proceed according to the plan.

As they entered the jungle, the scorching heat dissipated, but it became stiflingly hot. Soon, they were drenched in sweat, and after a while, they had to wave their hands to wipe their faces.

After about a quarter of an hour of advancement, Yilihan discovered the advantage of the peculiar military uniform worn by the soldiers from Great Han. The pants’ legs and cuffs were tightly sealed, and the collar fit snugly, making it difficult for mosquitoes and insects to crawl inside.

Yan Ge reminded, “Everyone, be careful. If any mosquitoes or insects land on you, don’t directly slap them with your hands. They might be poisonous. You can use a twig to flick them away.”

“Yes!” The special forces soldiers replied in unison.

Yilihan heard this and quickly reminded his own soldiers in the same manner, feeling wise for following behind the soldiers from Great Han.

Suddenly, several screams came from the front. The jungle was dense, and everyone was on horseback, almost following one another closely and making it difficult to overtake the others. They couldn’t be sure what had happened, but it probably wasn’t anything good.

Indeed, after walking for another mile, the following teams began to see several bodies lying in the grass. Some had swollen faces, others had swollen hands, and two of them had no visible wounds, most likely bitten by venomous insects.

Although they weren’t from their own Kingdom, these were still several living beings who had lost their lives in the jungle. As they sympathized, they became even more vigilant.

“Hiss—” an unfamiliar hiss from above made everyone raise their heads in alert.

They saw a yellowish-brown snake, as thick as an adult’s arm, coiling on a tree branch, staring coldly at them. They were so frightened that their hearts almost jumped out of their chests.

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Meng Gang quietly took out a flying dart.

Huangfu Yuchen stopped him, “Don’t act recklessly. This area is already strange, be cautious of nearby snake nests.”

Meng Gang immediately understood. If he failed to kill this snake with the dart, it might attract other snakes, which would be very dangerous.

Yang Zhuo remained calm and whispered, “Go one by one. The person in front advances while the person behind becomes the guard.”

Yan Ge naturally went first, followed by Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Jin. Gao Feng and Gao Yun were their personal guards, and they closely followed behind.

After Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen passed, they continued forward without looking back. Their visit to the Demon Fortress was not only for treasure and military competition but also to enhance the combat experience of these special forces. They couldn’t protect these hundred special forces soldiers like nannies. They would only intervene if these soldiers were in real danger.

And these special forces soldiers didn’t disappoint. When the snake finally couldn’t hold back and pounced, Zhang Qiao’s reaction was extremely quick. At the critical moment, he skillfully swung his long knife. A cold light flashed and the snake was cut in half.

Yan Ge looked up and saw the dense branches almost completely covering the sky, with only thin rays of sunlight seeping through the gaps in the leaves. Various insects and mosquitoes were flying haphazardly in the sky,

and occasionally, a bold spider would hang from the tree like a trapeze artist and soon weave a simple cobweb.

“Baby, is there something wrong?” Huangfu Yuchen followed his gaze.

Yan Ge said, “From the time we entered the desert until now, we’ve seen two abnormal species, but the animals we’ve seen, including the previous snake, appear normal.” By “abnormal,” he meant that no one else, except for him, recognized them.

Huangfu Yuchen understood his meaning and said, “Based on this, we should encounter monsters in the jungle too, but we haven’t. That itself is abnormal.”

He signaled Yang Zhuo, and Yang Zhuo immediately warned the people behind, “Everyone, be careful.”

The foreign soldiers in front also heard their conversation. They muttered to themselves, cursing that they could have said something comforting. However, they dared not voice their thoughts, fearing it would cause panic among the other soldiers.

At that moment, a cry of alarm suddenly came from the front. Someone shouted in terror, “Monster!”

Yan Ge glanced at Huangfu Yuchen innocently. He definitely wasn’t a crow mouth.

Huangfu Yuchen’s lips curved into a faint smile as he patted Yan Ge’s back. It was, of course, not his baby’s fault.

“Everyone, stop and stay alert!” Yang Zhuo commanded sternly.

Gao Feng rode up to Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen’s front, looking around warily.

“Ah—”

“Release the arrows!”

“Quick, dodge!”

Various shouts indicated that the people in front had indeed encountered a troublesome “enemy.”

Yan Ge released his spiritual sense and saw what the “monster” was. “Damn! What is that thing?”

Huangfu Yuchen saw that the creature was at least forty to fifty feet long, with a snake-like body as thick as a water tank, but it had eight crab-like pincers on its belly. He clicked his tongue.

“Swoosh—” The monster swept it’s tail, lifting four soldiers into the air and then heavily flinging them back down, instantly killing them.

“Shoot the arrows!” Wen Han said anxiously.

However, despite its thick body, the creature was agile. It suddenly retracted its eight pincers into its belly, turning into a regular snake. It swiftly twisted and maneuvered between the trees, easily evading the arrows shot from different directions. Then, with a few twists, it approached another group of soldiers and leaped upwards. Its eight pincers extended again, like eight massive scissors, grasping the necks of eight soldiers. With a few “snap” sounds, their necks were severed, and blood gushed out.

The monster opened it’s huge mouth and swallowed one of the decapitated bodies.

No one went to help the Liao Kingdom’s soldiers who were first to be attacked. First, they had to be vigilant against another creature like this one sneaking up on them. Secondly, the dense trees in the jungle would hinder large numbers of people from engaging in combat and might lead to unnecessary deaths.

The monster seemed to enjoy the taste and swallowed a second body. Its long tail swept over and knocked down two more people. Suddenly, it raised its upper body and emitted a sound resembling a cat’s whine.

Huangfu Yuchen’s expression changed, “Not good, it seems to be calling for its kind!”

Almost as soon as he finished speaking, the rustling sound of creatures moving in the trees became louder and turned into a shuffling sound. Before long, seven or eight smaller monsters jumped out from the grass on the west side. Although they were smaller, their bodies were still longer than that of a horse when fully extended.

Yang Zhuo immediately shouted, “Everyone dismount and protect the boss and young master!”

“Take care of yourselves!” Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen exchanged glances, then they flew up to a tree with Yan Jin.

Yang Zhuo knew that the Emperor and Yan Guiqing had excellent martial arts skills, so he didn’t say anything more. He ordered everyone to form a battle formation.

One of the small monsters charged straight towards the Great Han troops. Its fierce and violent aura made it seem invincible, fearless of anything.

“Archers, release the arrows!” Yang Zhuo calmly commanded.

“Swish, swish—” Hundreds of arrows were shot simultaneously.

Among them, Zhou Zheng’s arrow that released from his powerful bow, was the fastest. The white strong bow was heavy and needed about an arm strength of 100 catties to draw the bowstring. One could imagine the force behind an arrow shot with such strength.

Zhou Zheng’s aim was extremely accurate. The arrow hit a small monster, causing it to thrash violently.

A hit!

However, before everyone could relax, the small monster seemed to be angered. It raised its head and let out a roar, not caring about the arrow still

stuck in its body. It then lunged at them with lightning speed, and the special forces soldiers quickly avoided its attack.

Seeing its robust vitality, Yang Zhuo changed his strategy, “Spread out and surround it!”
The other small monsters are attacking the others, so they could concentrate on this one.

“Ah Fei, Jun Xiang, attack it from the front and distract it! The rest of you, ambush from behind!”

Ah Fei and Jun Xiang were agile in their lightness skills and could timely avoid the small monster’s attacks, thereby diverting its attention to prevent it from turning to attack others. However, the tail of the small monster was too flexible, and several special forces soldiers attacked it for a long time without touching its skin.

When the small monster twisted its body, ready to attack them, they leveraged the elasticity of the branches to leap up into the trees.

“Good!” Yang Zhuo saw two wounds on the small monster‘s body. “This method is effective. The people below, continue to distract the small monster! Gao Feng, Gao Yun, get ready to strike again!”

Gao Feng and Gao Yun held tree branches in their left hands and tightly gripped their swords in their right hands, their eyes fixed on the scene below, searching for the most opportune moment.

Due to their intense focus, Gao Feng didn’t notice a reddish-brown insect silently approaching his hand along the branch.

At the right moment, Yang Zhuo shouted, “Gao Feng, Gao Yun!” The two of them leaped down again. However, at the same time, the reddish-brown creature bit fiercely into Gao Feng’s hand.

Gao Feng’s hand immediately felt intense pain and almost lost sensation in an instant. He immediately guessed that he must have been poisoned. According to Yan Guiqing’s warning, he should take the antidote right

away. However, timing was critical, so he endured the pain and, at the same time as Gao Yun, struck at the small monster.

The small monster received two sword strikes but was still undeterred. It fell to the ground and twitched a few times before dying completely.

“Look how arrogant you were.” Gao Yun kicked the small monster’s corpse and suddenly heard a falling sound nearby.

Yang Zhuo was alarmed, “Gao Feng!”

Gao Yun turned around and saw Gao Feng collapsed on the ground, motionless — the back of his left hand had turned purple-black.

“Big brother!” Gao Yun was shocked and quickly sealed his acupoints.

Yan Ge who was in the tree also found something wrong, and his figure flashed and landed in front of the two brothers. He saw the color of the wound, and quickly touched several different acupuncture points on Gao Feng’s left arm. “He was bitten by a poisonous insect! Hurry up and feed the detoxification pill! “

Gao Yun had been anxious and absent-minded, and only then did he remember that he had the antidote with him. He quickly took out the medicine bottle and fed a pill to Gao Feng, lifting his chin to help him swallow.

Four special forces soldiers ran over without the need for instructions and shielded them in the middle. The rest of the troops were still dealing with other snakes, so they didn’t attract attention for the time being. There was no need to be too nervous.

Huangfu Yuchen was just a step behind Yan Ge. He also cared about Gao Feng, a loyal subordinate.

Yan Ge carefully examined the color of Gao Feng’s hand and then raised his arm to smell it.

Huangfu Yuchen thought he was going to suck out the poison and was startled, instinctively grabbing his arm.

“What are you doing?!”

“Young Master, do you want to suck out the poison? I’ll do it!” Gao Yun said as he opened his mouth, ready to suck out the toxins for Gao Feng.

Yan Ge quickly stopped him. “Don’t mess around! I’m just checking the smell of the wound.”

Huangfu Yuchen then let go of his arm.

“Keep an eye on him and don’t move it.” Yan Ge said, flying to the location where Gao Feng was just now, recalling which branch he had grabbed at the time. He quickly spotted the culprit. After confirming his guess, he flew back to the ground.

“Young Master, is my brother okay?” Gao Yun asked nervously.

“Don’t worry,” Yan Ge said, “He took the antidote in a timely manner. I just need to find another herb.”

Gao Yun worried, “Can you find the herb you need in such a strange place?”

Yan Ge said confidently, “Even though this jungle is weird, it still follows the natural laws of mutual generation and restraint. So, there must be the herb I need here. Zirui, help me.” Huangfu Yuchen had learned some medical skills and could be of assistance.

Huangfu Yuchen appeared by his side in a flash.

“Look for a green plant with very smooth front leaves, as if it could reflect light. It doesn’t have any fuzz, and on the back, it has a crack-like blood-red meridian. Its fruit looks like wheat ears, but it’s only the size of sesame seeds. Also, it has a slightly bitter taste.”

They spread out their spiritual conspicuousness, and suddenly, it was as if they had countless pairs of eyes. Soon, Huangfu Yuchen found the herb, and it was a whole cluster.

He directly pulled the whole cluster out, sniffed it, and handed it to Yan Ge. “Is it this, baby?”

“Yes.” Yan Ge kissed him on the face. “You’re lucky.”

To dispel the team’s worries, the two returned immediately. Yan Ge washed the leaves with water, crushed them, and then put them into Gao Feng’s water flask.

He shook the flask but there was not much water left, so he poured some from his own flask into it, and directly used his true qi to boil it until the water in the flask was reduced to about a bowl’s worth. He then added a pill into it and handed it to Huangfu Yuchen. “Make it warm.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s palm touched the flask, and the scalding water immediately became warm.

Yan Ge handed the flask to Gao Yun. “Okay, feed it to him. After he drinks it, let him rest. He will be fine but weak for the next two days, so take good care of him.”

“Yes, thank you, Young Master!” Gao Yun was very grateful.

The other special forces soldiers also looked at Yan Ge with great admiration.

Yan Ge blinked at Huangfu Yuchen: Be careful, I might overthrow you with my skills.

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Huangfu Yuchen didn’t mind. “The more they respect you, the happier I am.”

Yan Ge stretched out his hand and touched his face.

Huangfu Yuchen felt the warmth in his hand and understood his meaning. He smiled softly, but when his gaze glanced at the Liao Kingdom troops, who were still entangled by the big monster snake, and then at Yilihan, who was acting as if nothing happened, a cold smile appeared at the corner of his lips.

“Baby, it seems that the possibility of a treasure is very high; otherwise, Yilihan wouldn’t knowingly head towards the tiger’s den.”

“Isn’t that better?” Yan Ge said confidently, “If there is a treasure, Mai Kingdom and Wei Kingdom are probably thinking of using us to find it for them. We won’t play into their hands; once we find the treasure, it’s ours!” He had no sympathy for the Mai and Wei Kingdoms who had malicious intentions.

“That’s the plan.” Huangfu Yuchen nodded.

The two reached a consensus.

Huangfu Yuchen searched with his eyes for the guide and saw him being protected by six Liao Kingdom soldiers, looking panicked. Now that he knew the possibility of a treasure existing was very high, he couldn’t rest assured leaving the guide in the care of others. He turned to Yang Zhuo and gave him a few instructions.

Yang Zhuo went over and said to Wen Han, “General Wen, I will protect the guide for you…if you’re willing.”

Wen Han didn’t hesitate and agreed, “Thank you. However, the guide still needs to lead the way…”

Yang Zhuo said, “It seems you’ve suffered some losses this time. My men are willing to lead the way in front.”

Wen Han was a little suspicious and couldn’t figure out why he suddenly became so kind-hearted, but he wasn’t worried that the people from Great Han would let the guide slip away. Could a mere hundred people escape the pursuit of all the other armies? Thinking of this, he thanked Yang Zhuo gratefully and went to deal with the big monster snake.

After bringing the guide back, Yang Zhuo ordered his men, “Wait until they deal with the big monster snake, then we’ll lead the way in front.”

The special forces soldiers complied, but they were puzzled. It wasn’t their turn to lead the way yet. However, they didn’t ask questions; there must be a reason behind Yang Zhou’s arrangement, and all they had to do was obey.

Huangfu Yuchen said to the guide, “As long as you stay by our side obediently, we will naturally protect you.”

The guide knew that these people still needed him to lead the way, and he wasn’t afraid that they wouldn’t protect him with all their might. He nodded and said, “Thank you.”

Yan Ge took out a bottle of insect repellent from his sleeve, “This is insect repellent powder, apply some on your clothes.”

The guide’s face was covered with small red welts from insect bites. He thanked Yan Ge and took the bottle. He knew about Yan Ge’s abilities; the weird creatures that nobody else recognized, he did.

After applying the insect repellent, he quietly stood beside Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

Finally, Wen Han paid the price of two hundred and twenty-three soldiers' lives to deal with the big monster snake. His face was dark with resentment towards the other armies who stood idly by. However, he couldn't blame the other armies. First, their final destination was the Demon Fortress, and they didn't know how many other strange and dangerous things they would encounter on the way, so naturally, they had to preserve their strength as much as possible. Secondly, the jungle was dense with vegetation, and it wasn't convenient for them to run to the rescue.

In any case, this matter could only be temporarily passed over.

Everyone mounted their horses and continued on. Some horses were scared by the big monster snake and ran off without a trace, so some soldiers had no choice but to walk.

The team from Great Han led the guide to the front. The guide was at the very front, followed by Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, then Gao Feng, Gao Yun, and Yan Jin, and finally, Yang Zhuo leading the other special soldiers.

Suddenly, a group of dragonfly-like insects flew over. Yan Ge saw their sharp and flexible antennae, like freely retractable steel claws, and raised his spirit sword, swiping it a few times. The "dragonflies" fell to the ground, their threatening antennae shriveling up.

'What a powerful sword technique!' The guide secretly praised, and was finally relieved. At least he was in capable hands.

"How much longer until we arrive?" Yan Ge asked.

The guide replied, "At our fastest speed, we'll arrive tomorrow afternoon."

Huangfu Yuchen said, "Try to make it faster."

Fearing his cold demeanor, the guide hurriedly replied, "Yes." He looked around, using his unique method to determine their current location, then shook the reins and accelerated their pace.

After another two hours of riding, Huangfu Yuchen asked the guide to stop so they could rest, eat, and drink.

The guide was fortunate to receive a can of compressed biscuits. He hesitated for a moment, then quickly accepted it. Following the example of the special forces, he soaked it in water before eating. He found it very delicious, so he couldn't help but take a big bite.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had higher food standards and weren't particularly fond of compressed biscuits. Besides, they were currently in the Golden Core stage, so they didn't need to eat and only took a few bites.

"Swoosh…"

A strange sound came from the sky as a group of black-feathered birds with white bellies, similar in size to pigeons, landed on the surrounding trees and surrounded the group. They looked down at them with fierce and open beaks, emitting sharp cries.

A strange monkey on a tree looked extremely afraid of them. It turned and jumped to another branch, attempting to escape. However, it was spotted by one of the birds, and with a screech, the bird flew toward it like an arrow. The bird's way of flying was very peculiar – it flapped its wings once, then closed them, gliding like a wing in the hang glider. It landed on the monkey's back, and the monkey let out a miserable scream. With it's saw toothed mouth, it pecked the monkey repeatedly, hundreds or even thousands of times, until only a bloody skeleton remained.

Looking at it sent shivers down people's spines!

'Damn it! Aside from eagles, this is the first time I've seen birds that eat meat!' The soldiers all shouted this in their hearts. These birds were small and flew so fast, making it difficult for them to fight back.

"Stay alert!" Yang Zhuo ordered solemnly.

Seemingly angered by this command, the head bird let out a cry, and the other saw-toothed birds swooped down, attacking the group. In an instant,

several places in the large group echoed with pitiful wails.

“Stand still,” Huangfu Yuchen ordered the guide in a calm voice.

The guide nodded.

Three of the birds flew towards them simultaneously. Huangfu Yuchen raised his spirit sword calmly and, as the birds approached, drew a twisted arc in the air. “Puff, puff, puff,” three soft sounds rang out. The three birds were all cut in half and fell to the ground.

“Fire arrows!” Yang Zhuo commanded.

The archers knelt back to back in pairs, set their bows and arrows, and looked up at the sky. After aiming, they shot the arrows.

The birds flew too fast, and out of over twenty archers, only six arrows hit the birds.

Yan Ge noticed the guide gripping the reins tightly and asked cautiously, “What’s the problem?”

The guide said, “Last time we came here, we also encountered many strange creatures, but we never saw these birds… nor the black fleas, black spiders, or red bugs we encountered earlier…”

Yan Ge suddenly understood. Yilihan intentionally concealed this strange point.

Huangfu Yuchen said coldly, “At this point, it’s not important anymore.”

“Exactly.” Yan Ge agreed. No matter what weirdness this jungle held, since they had already arrived here, their goal of obtaining the treasure was certain.

He noticed a special forces soldier being surrounded by two saw-toothed birds, struggling to deal with them. Yan Ge swung his sword, and the sword light sparkled, deliberately only cutting down one of the birds.

“Baby, you protect the guide,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

“Don’t worry,” Yan Ge said.

Huangfu Yuchen then paid attention to the movement of the special forces soldiers. As soon as he saw someone in danger, he would take action to help.

Under his protection, none of their people were harmed.

The saw-toothed birds were small in size, agile in body, and flying in the air, making them harder to deal with than the monster snakes.

This time, apart from Great Han, which didn’t suffer any casualties, the other armies had significant losses. The strong smell of blood in the forest made everyone nauseous. Fortunately, all the strange birds were killed.

Looking at the intact hundred-man team fo Great Han, Yilihan, Bai Shaobai, Wen Han, and others were envious and resentful.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “The smell of blood here is too strong. We shouldn’t stay here for long. Let’s leave immediately!”

The people from the other teams hadn’t yet cleaned up the battlefield, but what Huangfu Yuchen said made sense. They had no choice but to quickly catch up, not even having time to count their numbers.

After riding for nearly half an hour, the large group arrived at the side of a small river. The grassy area on the riverbank was relatively open, and the trees were sparse. Yilihan, Bai Shaobai, and a few others insisted on resting here.

The guide said, “This is the only water source available before reaching the Demon Fortress.”

Yilihan doubted, “Can we drink the water in the river?” Having experienced the black river before, everyone was hesitant about water sources in the jungle. However, since entering the desert until now, they had been drinking the water they brought with them, and it was indeed running low.

The guide replied, “When we came in last time, we boiled the water from here and drank it without any problems. But this area is very strange, and I can’t say for sure whether the water is safe to drink now.”

Everyone looked at Yan Ge at the same time.

Yan Ge was speechless. He was a physician, not a water quality expert. In the end, he could only say, “It’s best not to drink it.”

“But we don’t have much water left,” Bai Shaobai said.

Huangfu Yuchen looked at Yang Zhuo.

Yang Zhuo also said, “Ours is the same.”

Yan Ge thought for a moment, “There’s only one way—I’ll poison the water first, then detoxify it, and finally, we can boil it and drink it.”

Yilihan, Bai Shaobai, and others remained silent, feeling awkward. Poisoning it first, then detoxifying it—who knows if you might pretend to detoxify but actually not, poisoning all of us to death?

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Yan Ge had already guessed that they wouldn’t believe him and didn’t care. He was fine with these people not trusting him; it was even better. He exchanged a glance with Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen had the remaining water from the water bottle transferred into the special forces’ canteens. It wasn’t much, just enough to fill a dozen or so canteens. He then directed the special forces to carefully fill the empty water tanks with river water, making sure not to get their hands wet.

Yan Ge secretly used a confusing spiritual technique, creating illusions in the minds of the people present. He took advantage of the situation to retrieve the water tank filled with water that he had previously placed in the system backpack before entering the Mai Kingdom. He replaced the empty water tank with the full one.

Yilihan, Bai Shaobai, and a few other team leaders observed his actions carefully while having their soldiers count the number of people and remaining supplies. Due to the previous rush, they hadn’t been able to remove the supplies from some of the horses. Two kingdoms’ soldiers happened to have lost their water tanks, and they kept their eyes fixed on the people from Great Han, wanting to see if Yan Ge would indeed use the method of poisoning and detoxification to ensure the reliability of the river water.

After Yan Ge surreptitiously switched the water, he pretended to put poison and an antidote into the water tank and then had the water boiled. To ensure the durability of the water tank, they were made of iron and could be placed directly on the fire.

After handling these tasks, Yan Ge deliberately went to Yilihan and the others with enthusiasm, “Generals, do you need any help? Since we’ve already worked together once, this time it’s free. You see, this is how we handled our water. I wouldn’t harm my own people. Right?” He knew that Yilihan and Bai Shaobai would never seek his help, so he deliberately tried to persuade them.

Yilihan, Wen Han, and the others had long noticed that Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had special status within the team. They had even seen Huangfu Yuchen give orders to Yang Zhuo several times. From this, they deduced that Huangfu Yuchen must hold a high position in Great Han, but they couldn’t figure out why he was hiding his identity. Setting aside other kingdoms like the Liao Kingdom, Wei Kingdom, etc, the Mai Kingdom had repeatedly provoked the Great Han Kingdom before. Yilihan didn’t believe that people from Great Han had no grudges against them, so he was very cautious and politely declined Yan Ge’s proposal.

“Thank you, Physician Qin, but you’ve also been tired on this journey. You don’t need to trouble yourself further. This general will have his men boil the water at high temperature,” Yilihan said.

People who frequently traveled outside understood that sometimes the water in the wild was not clean, and drinking it might cause stomach pain. After boiling it, there would generally be no problems.

Bai Shaobai, Wen Han, and the others were also vigilant and politely rejected Yan Ge’s goodwill.

They ordered their soldiers to empty the water tanks and fill them with river water. They used leaves to collect water, quickly building a fire to boil it.

Once the water boiled, Yilihan filled a water bag and, after the water cooled down, fed it to one of the horses.

Yan Ge sat on a piece of wood, leaning against Huangfu Yuchen with a faint smile on his lips, watching him leisurely.

After traveling such a long distance, the horses were thirsty and began to drink the water slowly. Everyone watched closely.

After drinking water, the horse bent down and nibbled at the grass on the ground.

Yilihan sighed with relief, and a smile unconsciously appeared at the corner of his mouth. However, as soon as he turned around, he heard a muffled sound and several exclamations behind him. He quickly turned back, only to see the horse foaming at the mouth and convulsing uncontrollably. Its robust body withered rapidly, and soon, it was nothing but skin and bones, lying motionless on the ground.

Almost everyone's face turned pale at the sight.

Yan Ge was also stunned. He had only deduced that the water in this jungle might be problematic, but he didn't expect it to be true. He secretly thanked Huangfu Yuchen for being so considerate and bringing along several spare water tanks.

Seeing Yilihan and Bai Shaobai's gloomy expressions, his mood improved. "It's good that General Yilihan is cautious, it's just a pity about the horse. Generals, shall I help you purify the river water? I assure you that, as a physician, I won't involve myself in any political matters. Really!" He was about to say, "Look into my sincere eyes."

Huangfu Yuchen's dark eyes had an indulgent smile.

Yang Zhuo and the others chuckled. Although they couldn't harm these Mai Kingdom people, they found satisfaction in irritating them.

Yilihan, Bai Shaobai, and others looked at him with expressionless faces. 'If you weren't so close to that cold-faced special forces soldier who was likely a high-ranking member of Great Han, maybe we could believe you.'

But if they don't let Yan Ge help purify the drinking water, where were they supposed to get water? They couldn't let their soldiers die of thirst before reaching the Demon Fortress, right?

Yan Ge couldn’t openly confront them yet. He was sure that if he pushed them too hard, they would retaliate. For now, he decided to amuse himself.

Just then, everyone noticed that the sky was getting darker, and looking up, they saw that it was covered in dark clouds.

Since the area had sparse trees, they were able to see the sky, and they were overjoyed. They glanced at Yan Ge with a hint of a smile.

They didn’t necessarily need Yan Ge’s help. Rainwater was the cleanest, and it was readily available for use.

“Collect water using oilcloths!” Yilihan gave the order.

Bai Shaobai and the others followed his lead.

Yan Ge pretended to spread his hands in disappointment.

Huangfu Yuchen pinched his shoulder and went to fetch the waterproof cloak from his equipment bag.

The special forces soldiers quickly took out their waterproof cloaks and used them to collect rainwater under the water tanks, working quickly to build a fire.

“Boom!” A thunderous sound came from the sky, and the dark clouds thickened.

The water he kept in the system didn’t need to be boiled; it could be drunk directly. Yan Ge pretended to walk over to the fire and looked into the water tank, “It’s ready. Hurry and fill the water bottles.”

The special forces soldiers, whose water bottles were almost empty, quickly lined up in front of several water tanks and filled their bottles just before the rain started falling. They even managed to leave enough water in two water tanks for later use.

Yang Zhuo ordered the water tanks to be sealed shut, and the rainwater quickly cooled them down. Several soldiers promptly placed the water

tanks on their horses, ready to depart at any moment.

The soldiers from the Mai, Liao, Wei, and other kingdoms were still desperately collecting rainwater. Four soldiers held the corners of an oilcloth, forming a makeshift container. Once it was filled with rain water, they'd pour the water into the water tanks.

The people from Great Han leisurely watched from the side.

Ordinary oilcloths were not durable enough to withstand heavy rain. It didn't take long for some soldiers' cloths to lose their waterproofing, leaving them drenched. They couldn't help but cast envious glances at the soldiers from Great Han. Their waterproof cloaks not only had hoods to shield them from rain but also reached down to their ankles, protecting their entire bodies. It was clear that this must be an invention by their esteemed Yan Guiqing. Alas, why didn't their kingdom's emperor have the luck to marry such a talented consort?

Yilihan accidentally caught sight of the envious looks his soldiers were casting and almost slipped in the muddy water.

Being a black bellied person, Huangfu Yuchen looked around and put on a serious expression, saying: "Generals, there may be some other creatures in this jungle. We've stayed here for too long. If we are discovered by some carnivorous animals, it won't be good. I hope you all can be quick."

*A black bellied person is someone who is crafty and sly.

Yan Ge turned his head and smirked.

Yilihan, Bai Shaobai, and the others all maintained a serious expression, acting as if they hadn't heard him, and continued to have their soldiers collect rainwater.

There is strength in numbers and soon, their water tanks were filled, and the soldiers' water bottles were also filled with water.

“We can set off now,” Yilihan said with a proud look, trying hard to maintain his arrogance.

Yang Zhuo commanded the guide to continue.

“Yes, please follow me,” the guide also wore the waterproof clothing prepared by the people of Great Han and witnessed another skill of theirs. He felt somewhat excited, thinking that with Great Han’s people around, he might have a chance to survive and return!

The rain poured down, and the ground quickly became covered in water. The horses’ hooves splashed water high into the air.

“Huier—” Suddenly, Yan Ge’s horse went mad. It raises its front half violently, almost standing upright. Yan Ge was caught off guard and was thrown off the horse.

Huangfu Yuchen acted quickly, reaching out and scooping him up into his arms before placing him at the front.

Yan Ge’s horse let out a painful cry, its limbs went limp, and it collapsed on the ground, dead.

“What’s going on?” Yan Ge was surprised.
He scanned the horse’s body and it was only then that he noticed several worm-like creatures emerging from the soil, greedily drinking the rainwater. Their bodies quickly grew, ultimately turning into black round balls larger than fists, crawling leisurely on the ground. Near his horse’s hooves, there was a black, tattered cloth-like thing, smeared with nauseating slime. Yan Ge immediately understood that these creatures were poisonous. His horse accidentally stepped on one of the “black balls,” got contaminated by the venom, and thus lost its life.

Huangfu Yuchen watched the wriggling black balls on the ground, his brows tightly furrowed. “General Yang, spread the order, we must not step on these black balls.”

Before the words even landed, cries of alarm came from behind, mixed with cries of “Help!”

Yang Zhuo quickly gave the command and their team became cautious.

However, horses and humans couldn’t communicate. Even if people intended to guide the horses to avoid the black balls, the horses would still not predict where the balls were. Yan Ge listened to the commotion behind him, and within less than a moment, more than ten horses had been poisoned to death. Several soldiers were probably also poisoned when they came into contact with the venom.

“Boss, it won’t work if it continues like this,” Yang Zhuo rode his horse to Huangfu Yuchen’s side. There were too many black balls on the ground, and even people walking on the ground would find it challenging not to step on them, let alone horses. Their team had already lost five horses.

Huangfu Yuchen extended his hand toward Yang Zhuo’s long spear.

Yang Zhuo understood and handed the long spear to him.

Huangfu Yuchen grasped the long spear and reached under one of the black balls and flicked it upward. The black ball immediately flew far away, disappearing into the grass. He was very cautious, not piercing the skin of the black ball and using a clever force to send it flying away.

Yang Zhuo was delighted. “Boss, this is a good idea!”

“Haha!” Yan Ge couldn’t help but laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Huangfu Yuchen raised the corner of his mouth, looking at him with indulgence and asking softly.

Yang Zhuo instructed the special forces to pick up sturdy tree branches and do the same.

Yan Ge chuckled. “Haven’t you realized that you’ve created a new sport?”

Huangfu Yuchen understood and reached up to adjust his slightly askew hat, then used his hand to wipe off the water on Yan Ge’s forehead.

The team continued to move forward. Picking away the black balls blocking their path was also a troublesome task. However, there was no other way at the moment, so the progress was very slow.

Luckily, after about three-quarters of an hour, the rain stopped. Although the sky was still overcast, the water on the ground seeped into the soil and flowed to lower areas. The black balls gradually shrank, eventually returning to the size of earthworms and silently burrowed back into the ground.

It was around the hour of shen when the sky finally cleared up.

The jungle looked almost the same everywhere, so everyone decided to set up camp where they were.

Having just experienced the rain, the humidity in the forest was particularly high, making it easy to get sick. Yan Ge took out a few pills and had someone cook a pot of hot soup for the soldiers with some seasoning mixed in.

Because he was bored, he accompanied a few special forces soldiers to gather some of the wild vegetables he recognized nearby. After washing them, they put them in the soup to cook, resulting in a delightful aroma.

After the soldiers drank the hot soup, their whole bodies felt warm, and their spirits improved significantly.

The contrasting experiences along this journey were enough to make people feel depressed. Moreover, the other kingdoms had also lost quite a number of men. Several team leaders didn’t want to mistreat their soldiers, so they followed Yan Ge’s example and added some dried meat and wild herbs to the soup. The soldiers felt equally invigorated.

As for the animals in the jungle, they didn’t dare to touch them.

“I hope we can get through tonight smoothly,” the guide sighed, “as long as we survive this difficult night, the rest of the journey will be a bit smoother.”

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It had just rained, the ground was wet, and there were very few dry branches. So they couldn’t make too many bonfires. To prevent nocturnal animal attacks, Yan Ge took out the Night Pearl, placed it in a small net and hung it on a tree branch. The special forces soldiers sat under its light, and a sense of security immediately returned. At this point, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen no longer cared about the possibility of their identities being exposed.

Yilihan and Bai Shaobai were the most cunning ones, always trailing behind Great Han’s team, now they were also benefiting from the light.

Fortunately, the night passed without incident.

At daybreak, everyone quickly ate some dry rations and continued on their way.

The jungle was full of trees, and Yan Ge was curious about how the guide could remember the way.

The guide said, “This humble one cannot explain it clearly. I just look around and feel that we should go this way.”

Yan Ge thought that it was probably some kind of talent.

As the sun gradually rose, the forest became hotter as the moisture dried out, and everyone was sweating profusely.

After moving for nearly two hours, the guide couldn’t contain his excitement, “We’re almost there.”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen released their spiritual consciousness and indeed, about two miles away stood a tall castle. The castle had been eroded by wind and rain all year round, and many parts of the walls had already fallen off, leaving mottled marks. The dried grass around the castle was taller than a person.

Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge exchanged a glance.

Yan Ge said, “General Yang, we both need to answer nature’s call, so give us a moment.”

Before Yang Zhuo could speak, Yilihan spoke up, “You two have such a good relationship, even coordinating bathroom breaks.”

“We made General Yilihan laugh,” Yan Ge smiled charmingly at him, but his eyes conveyed the message—It’s none of your business.”

Yilihan interpreted it and his face turned black with anger.

“You can go, just be careful,” Yang Zhuo guessed they had some secret plan.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen dismounted.

“Father.” Yan Jin reached out, and Huangfu Yuchen picked him up.

Yan Jin said mischievously, “I need to do a big one, no need to wait for us.”

After entering deeper into the bushes, Huangfu Yuchen used a concealment technique to shield them from view. The three of them applied insect repellent on themselves and quickly flew towards the castle in the distance.

“Zirui, are you planning to explore the Demon Fortress in advance?” Yan Ge asked.

Yan Jin huffed, “Father, is there any point? There must be monsters in the Demon Fortress. If we explore it first, wouldn’t we be doing a favor for the Mai Kingdom and Wei kingdom? I believe we should just focus on protecting our people.”

Huangfu Yuchen sighed, “Have both of you forgotten about the Golden Python?”

“Oh!” Yan Ge clapped his hands, “Right! We can release the Golden Python. If it rushes straight into the Demon Fortress, it means there’s definitely treasure inside!”

Indeed, this was Huangfu Yuchen’s idea: let the Golden Python lead them to the treasure, and then he and Yan Ge could use their spatial abilities to empty the treasure room without anyone noticing.

Yan Ge and Yan Jin both gave a thumbs up to Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen clasped his fists and said, “You’re too kind, too kind.”

Yan Ge and Yan Jin were amused.

Without hesitation, Yan Ge took out the box that sealed the Golden Python and set it free. The Golden Python was so excited that it rushed forward even before its entire body landed on the ground.

Yan Ge and the other two quickly followed.

Sure enough, the Golden Python’s target was the Demon Fortress. It immediately burrowed underground upon reaching the castle. Yan Ge took out the Night Pearl, and the three followed closely behind.

They arrived in an underground chamber, and their eyes were almost blinded by the sparkling gold and silver treasures that filled the room.

This treasure room was about two hundred square meters and was nearly filled to the brim. Due to its age, the jewels were covered with some dust, but it did not diminish their enchanting brilliance.

–“Ding. Side mission – Collect all treasures. Rewards once the mission is successful: 1000 silver taels and a silver box. Punishment upon mission failure: Deduction of 1000 silver taels. If you accept the mission, please choose ‘Yes’; if you reject the mission, please choose ‘No’.”

Yan Ge accepted the mission, and his face almost broke into a smile.

Without warning, the Golden Python, as if it hadn't eaten for centuries, pounced on a box of gold and opened its mouth wide.

"Ah!" Yan Ge was caught off guard, and the box was emptied in an instant.

Yan Ge felt heartbroken and immediately used a shrinking technique to reduce the size of the Golden Python. The pitiful creature struggled on the ground, torn between going after the gold and being sucked back by Yan Ge's palm.

Yan Ge stared at the Golden Python, wishing to dissect its body and take out the gold. Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Jin watched Yan Ge helplessly, unable to suppress their laughter.

"Alright, baby, there's still plenty here. Consider that box as the Golden Python's hard work," Huangfu Yuchen advised.

Yan Ge thought that he had always been a generous boss, so he felt at ease and put the Golden Python back into the box. He then surveyed the treasures in the room.

Taking a look around, his attention was drawn to a gray silk box placed on a simple altar. The box had some lines that resembled scriptures and was locked.

Huangfu Yuchen also walked over, raised his hand, and shot out some true qi, unlocking the box.

Inside the box was a round pearl-like sphere weighing about half a catty.

"This doesn't look like a pearl. Why is it being valued so much?" Yan Ge was cautious and did not directly reach out to take it. Having grown up in a prestigious family before and now living in the palace, appreciating jewelry was an easy task for him.

Huangfu Yuchen noticed some writing under the brocade cloth on the "pearl". He waved his hand, and the wind lifted the cloth, revealing several

characters inscribed at the bottom of the box.

“Must accommodate the relics of the divine monk?” Yan Ge read aloud.

Huangfu Yuchen looked at the piles of treasures and said, “If that’s the case, this place is most likely the batch of treasures Suyi Malo, the leader of the Suyi nobles, took away years ago.”

*You can check chapter 171 for the backstory on the Suyi nobles incase you forgot.

Yan Ge was puzzled, “This whole area is extremely strange, filled with dangers. How did Suyi Malo and his people manage to come in? According to what you said, that war happened over ninety years ago, so why haven’t we seen a single corpse along the way? Could it be that the monsters here even devoured their bones? Or maybe Suy Malo found a way to pass safely through this area?”

“It is indeed strange, but now it’s difficult to find the answer,” Huangfu Yuchen stroked his face and smiled gently, “I thought your first reaction would be to collect all the treasures.”

Yan Ge put on a scholarly posture and waved his hand, “Not at all. I am a person who values knowledge and inquisitiveness.”

“Who dares to say you’re not?” Huangfu Yuchen teased him. “Let’s put all these away first.”

“Yeah.” Yan Ge nodded, “I’ll take it. You and Little Jin can rest on the side.”

Huangfu Yuchen walked over to the side, watching Yan Ge as he stored all the boxes of gold and silver treasures into his space. He even hummed an unknown tune, not leaving a single small pearl behind. It truly was a meticulous process.

–“Ding. Side mission – Collect all treasures. Mission successful. Reward: 1000 silver taels and a silver box. Would you like to open the silver box now?”

Yan Ge chose to open it.

–“Congratulations, you have obtained ten Foundation Building Pills.”

“Congratulations, you have obtained ten Foundation Building Pills.”

A nice reward!

Yan Ge daydreamed, he hoped that the reward for the next mission would be the formula for Foundation Building Pills. Then he would refine as many of them as he could. However, receiving ten Foundation Building Pills was already very lucky.

In any case, with this batch of treasures, Great Han’s national treasury would be quite abundant, and there would be no need to skimp on various aspects of national development.

Yan Ge said with a beaming smile, “Zirui, this trip was worth it.”

“In the future, I’ll take you on more trips whenever there’s a chance,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

After making sure that there were no traces left to follow, Yan Ge released the Golden Python to fill the tunnel it had drilled. Then, the three of them quickly left and appeared behind the rear team from Great Han, pretending to chase after the frontmost troops.

After catching up, the three of them remounted their horses.

Because the guide said they would soon reach the Demon Fortress, their marching speed was fast and it didn’t take long for them to arrive at the grassland in front of the Demon Fortress.

“We’ve finally arrived!” Yilihan stared intently at the Demon Fortress.

Now, Yan Ge had the opportunity to carefully examine the Demon Fortress. It was a very large castle covering an area of over three thousand mu. Through the dense weeds, one could vaguely see the aged stone bricks on the ground. It seemed that the Demon Fortress must have been very prosperous in the past. The place where the name was engraved on the castle had already become faded and unclear, and it couldn’t be confirmed if it was the Twin Moon Palace.

*You can check chapter 176 for the short backstory on the Twin Moon Palace.

“General Yilihan, should we let the soldiers rest and recuperate here before exploring the Demon Fortress?” Bai Shaobai was sure that he also knew the situation. Although he had no expression on his face, there was a hint of excitement in his eyes.

Huangfu Yuchen became even more certain that the Mai and Wei kingdoms were scheming against Great Han, and even other kingdoms. A cold smile appeared at the corner of his lips. Unfortunately, their wishful thinking was destined to be in vain.

Yilihan said, “Rest for half an hour on-site.”

To prevent soldiers from being harmed by insects in the grass, they collectively cleared a barrier on the edge of the square and set fire to the dried grass on the square.

Afterward, everyone took out dry rations to munch on, while the more exhausted soldiers lay down on the ground to rest for a while— there might be another tough battle ahead.

Yang Zhuo, Yilihan, Bai Shaobai, Wen Han, and other leaders each led a small team of twenty people to inspect the situation outside the Demon Fortress.

Yan Ge walked to Gao Feng’s side. “Gao Feng, how are you?”

Gao Feng had been resting with his eyes closed and quickly opened them, “Young Master, I’m feeling much better now, just a bit weak.”

Yan Ge took his pulse, “Don’t worry, you’re recovering well. Remember to drink more water. I guess everyone will split into several groups to explore the inside of the castle. Staying outside might not be entirely safe. Later, you’ll also go in and follow behind me and Zirui.”

“Thank you, young master,” the two brothers thanked him simultaneously.

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Yan Ge returned to Huangfu Yuchen's side. Seeing that everyone was munching on dry rations, he sighed softly.

"What's wrong?" Huangfu Yuchen supported his shoulder.

"I want to eat the dishes from Liuxian Pavilion," Yan Ge complained, gazing at him with a hint of resentment.

Huangfu Yuchen hurriedly comforted, "I'll take you there once we are back at the capital. I'll have someone inform the manager to have the entire place reserved in advance and make two or three hundred dishes that can fill up all the tables in the hall. You can eat whatever you like. Yang Zhuo and the others have also worked hard on this journey, so we can invite them to a meal as well."

"Good idea!" Yan Ge licked his lips. "The more you talk about it, the more I want to eat."

Their voices weren't deliberately lowered, and several special forces soldiers around overheard and excitedly whispered the good news to each other. They didn't have many opportunities to eat at the Liuxian Pavilion. The Emperor and Yan Guiqing are indeed close to the people!

Due to the vast size of the Demon Fortress, it took a long time for Yang Zhuo, Yilihan, Bai Shaobai, and the others to return with their teams.

In the imperial edict, the winner was determined by the army that reached the Demon Fortress first. However, due to encountering many dangers along the way and having only one guide, General Yilihan silently changed that decision. As for how to divide the treasure, they would discuss it after finding it.

Yilihan said, “The Demon Fortress has a total of eight entrances. My idea is to divide our seventeen teams into nine groups. One group will remain outside to guard our supplies, and the other eight groups will enter the Demon Fortress through different entrances to search for the treasure. After finding it, we’ll meet here. What do you all think?”

This arrangement made sense, and the other leaders had no objections.

“But, how should we divide?”

Yilihan said, “Our Mai Kingdom soldiers have the best physique among all the kingdoms, so we’ll stay outside to guard the supplies. In case of any danger, we can protect all the supplies in time. The remaining sixteen kingdoms can evenly split into eight groups. Great Han has the fewest soldiers, and Wei kingdom has the most, so they can go together; Liao Kingdom and Youji Kingdom can go together…..This way, the total number of soldiers in each major group is roughly equal.”

Yang Zhuo said, “In my view, this arrangement might not be appropriate. Looking at how big the Demon Fortress is, you can tell the rooms inside must be intricate and complex. Once there’s any danger, those with better physique will be better at dealing with it. Therefore, I think the Mai kingdom’s army should also enter. This way, we’ll have a better chance of finding the treasure. Additionally, what if we find the treasure in the end and the kingdoms staying outside get greedy and poison our water? For safety reasons, at least three kingdoms should stay behind to keep an eye on each other. What do you generals think?”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen didn’t tell Yang Zhuo that they already obtained the treasure, and he couldn’t guess what the Mai Kingdom was planning, but that wasn’t an issue as long as they went against whatever plan they had. If there’s really a treasure inside, it was impossible to let the Mai Kingdom to sit back and enjoy it.

This proposal received support from several other leaders.

“General Yang makes sense.”

“I agree with this plan.”

After some debate among the leaders, they finally settled on an action plan. The Mai, Liao, and Wei kingdoms had the most surviving soldiers so each left behind two hundred people to guard the supplies. The rest would enter the castle.

Great Han’s troops were few, so they would go with the Wei kingdom’s army, entering through the main eastern entrance of the Demon Fortress.

“Now, let’s set off. We’ll meet here after one hour. If we find the treasure, that’s great. If not, we’ll rest and then set off later,” Bai Shaobai said.

Everyone understood and prepared their weapons, water, and torches before setting off separately.

Upon entering the main entrance, they found a straight corridor. As the entire castle was almost sealed off, the further they went, the darker it became. However, they could still vaguely see that there were many doors on both sides of the corridor, leading to small rooms. To find the treasure, they could only search through each room one by one.

Bai Shaobai suggested, “General Yang, there are so many rooms here. Why don’t we split into two teams? One team can search the rooms on the left, and the other team can search the rooms on the right.”

“Alright,” Yang Zhuo agreed. Bai Shaobai had over eight hundred soldiers in total, with three hundred staying outside, leaving over five hundred. Splitting them into two teams resulted in each team having over three hundred soldiers.

Yang Zhuo also divided his three hundred soldiers into three teams: one to check the rooms with odd numbers, another to check the rooms with even numbers, and the last team to be on guard outside. In case of any unexpected situations, they could provide assistance at any time.

Upon opening the first room, a choking cloud of dust rushed out. Startled by the intrusion, snakes, insects, mice, and ants that had made nests inside

scurried away rapidly. The rustling sounds were densely packed, giving one goosebumps.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen couldn't outright tell Yang Zhuo that there was no treasure inside, so they used their eyes to suggest he didn't have to search so carefully.

Yang Zhuo got the hint and signaled the message to his subordinates using a new set of military sign language.

An entire hour passed, and apart from discovering a nest of strange snakes and two nests of scorpions, they found nothing. When they returned to the square, they found that others also had no harvest.

After resting for two incense sticks' worth of time, they decided to check again.

It soon became evident that there was no treasure inside the Demon Fortress. It could be seen that until it was dark, they had gained nothing. Not only that, but the Demon Fortress, which was such a good shelter from the wind and rain, had long been occupied by various monsters, resulting in significant losses to each group, and the deaths were all tragic.

Even the mighty Mai Kingdom was left with only over 500 soldiers. Wei kingdom was left with just over 400, Liao Kingdom with over 400, and several other small kingdoms had even greater losses. Morale was extremely low, and the shadow of death loomed over them all.

No one from Great Han was injured or killed, thanks to Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. Great Han had always acted alongside the Wei Kingdom, and Bai Shaobai had long noticed their extraordinary martial arts skills.

"General Yilihan, we must leave early tomorrow morning. Our water reserves are running low, and we can't stay here waiting for the next rainfall," Bai Shaobai said in a stern tone, conveying his dissatisfaction with the Mai Kingdom. They were convinced by the Mai Kingdom's claim that there was a treasure in the Demon Fortress, which led to the joint

exploration plan. However, now they hadn’t even found a single gold piece, making Bai Shaobai furious.

Yilihan also wondered whether he was being manipulated by his own king. The king’s plan was this: there indeed was treasure in the Demon Fortress, but it was also filled with dangers. If they explored it solely with their own forces, they would suffer great losses. It was better to use the treasure as bait, getting all the neighboring kingdoms involved and having them help in the search. Once the treasure was found, they would cooperate with the Wei Kingdom to seize it. Other kingdoms didn’t matter, but they must exterminate the 1,000 elite soldiers of Great Han as revenge for the Fumian and Guyidian incidents, letting Great Han’s emperor know they were not to be trifled with.

However, perhaps they guessed it was a plot or it was by accident, Great Han had sent only 100 elite soldiers.

What surprised Yilihan even more was the fact that there was no trace of treasure inside the Demon Fortress. Before setting off, his king had given him a treasure map, indicating that the treasure was in a secret chamber beneath the main hall. To avoid suspicion, he arranged for the representatives of the Youji Kingdom to investigate there. They did find a secret chamber, but it was completely devoid of treasure.

Yilihan felt it was impossible for someone to secretly move the treasure from the Demon Fortress without even a whisper of a rumor. So, his target shifted from the neighboring kingdoms to his own king. He really wondered if his past mistakes had caused the king to bear a grudge against him, and this was the opportunity to eliminate him. The thought of serving his king with utmost loyalty for so many years only to end up in this situation made him seethe with anger.

For now, the most crucial thing was to stabilize the situation. Yilihan could only feign regret and say, “It seems the information was wrong. On behalf of His Majesty, I apologize to all of you. The night is long, and we have already suffered significant losses. In my opinion, we don’t need to wait until tomorrow morning. Let’s head back now.”

While the generals were frustrated about the wasted trip, it was not the right time to confront Yilihan. Moreover, they would still need to cooperate on their way back to deal with the monsters. But they had decided that once they returned to their own kingdoms, they would definitely report the matter to their respective kings, especially Maiguo's king. Several team leaders thought, 'We might be small kingdoms, but we are not to be bullied!'

After everyone finished organizing, they began their journey back.

Yilihan's straightforwardness surprised Yan Ge. He quietly asked Huangfu Yuchen, "We all thought the Mai Kingdom and Wei kingdom had some plot against us, and the Demon Fortress would definitely be the place where they'd act. Why did he give up like this?"

Huangfu Yuchen was also puzzled, but as someone who had studied the art of kingship, he quickly understood the situation and explained to Yan Ge, "Yilihan didn't find the treasure, so he must suspect that Hu Mailong played him…"

Hu Mailong and Yilihan would definitely have conflicts in the future. This was indeed an unexpected delight.

After hearing Huangfu Yuchen's analysis, Yan Ge couldn't help but be overjoyed. To avoid irritating the team leaders who had suffered significant losses and the soldiers who had lost many comrades, he had to suppress his laughter, but everyone could see the bright smile on his face.

But what could they do to him? This Physician Qin and that special forces soldier were martial arts experts.

With the experience from the journey here, the return journey was smoother although they still encountered various monsters.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen refrained from provoking the other kingdoms too much and even lent them a hand several times. The journey went smoothly without any trouble.

After leaving the desert, the armies of various kingdoms bid farewell one by one.

The teams of Great Han, Mai, and Youji Kingdoms continued to travel together until they reached Maieden.

Hu Mailong was probably confident that his army would surely bring back the treasure, so he sent a 5,000-strong army to welcome Yilihan's troops. However, when their general saw that Yilihan wasn't carrying many large chests as they expected, he frowned.

Yang Zhuo wasn't foolish enough to get involved in their matters. He bowed and said, "General Yilihan, please convey my greetings to your king on my behalf. When I return to my kingdom, I will inform my emperor of this matter truthfully. At that time, our emperor will surely send a letter to your king."

Yilihan nodded unenthusiastically, "General Yang, have a safe journey."

"Farewell!"

"Depart—"

The hundred-person team from the Mai Kingdom raced towards the border.

The Youji Kingdom also bid their farewells promptly.

After resting for a day at Xiguan Pass, Yan Ge's group set off on their journey back to the capital.

When they were a day away from the capital, Huangfu Yuchen sent urgent an message along the way, requesting the relay stations to expedite the delivery to Liuxian Pavilion in the capital. Soon, the next day's reservation was arranged accordingly.

The following morning, the team returned to the capital.

Though the common people didn't know the specifics of their mission, they cheered excitedly upon seeing Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen in their

camouflage uniforms, along with Yan Jin.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Everyone will have two days off. Go freshen up now and meet at Liuxian Pavilion for lunch.”

“Yes! Thank you for your grace, Your Majesty!”

Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, and Yan Jin returned to the First Company to wash up and change into clean clothes.

When the Emperor invites people for a meal, who dares to be late. The special forces soldiers quickly took a shower at their accommodations, changed clothes and arrived at the Liuxian Pavilion.

Liuxian Pavilion had no other guests at the moment. The manager and attendants warmly and attentively welcomed them.

In a short while, Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, and Yan Jin arrived dressed in casual clothing.

Everyone knelt down to pay their respects.

“Rise,” Huangfu Yuchen said, “Today, Yan Guiqing, Yan Jin, and I are your comrades, not your masters. There’s no need to be so formal.”

“Thank you for your kindness, Your Majesty!”

The manager immediately ordered the dishes to be served. As everyone looked at the variety of dishes, they couldn’t help but exclaim in surprise, their mouths watering in secret.

Yan Ge smiled and said, “Take any seat you like. Even in the palace, the Emperor and I have never ordered so many dishes in one go. Today’s a rare opportunity, so eat as much as you want.”

With that, he didn’t pay much attention to the others, instead taking Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Jin to grab some plates. Like they were at a buffet, they picked the dishes they liked from various tables before sitting down and started to eat, even having a few glasses of wine.

Touched by the Emperor and Yan Guiqing's gesture, the others didn't want to disappoint or offend them. With Gao Yun, Ah Fei, and Jun Xiang, who were good at livening up the atmosphere, everyone gradually relaxed. The entire hall became lively, as if it were a festive occasion.

– Volume 3 Complete –

We are finally done with Volume 3 **( )**

Next Volume: Emperor's Eternal Heart Knot (187-210). Let's finally work on that annoying Centipede Organization and enemy kingdoms.

MCUS Chapter 187

Huangfu Yuchen looked at the document in his hand, and a pensive expression appeared on his brow. After a moment, he spoke, “Deng Mande, summon Prime Minister Wu.”

Soon, an announcement came from outside the Imperial study—

“Prime Minister Wu seeks an audience—”

Prime Minister Wu arrived promptly, and Huangfu Yuchen stopped his formalities.

“Prime Minister Wu, there’s no need for excessive courtesy. I have just finished reading your document.”

Prime Minister Wu bowed and said, “I humbly listen to Your Majesty’s instructions.”

During the morning court two days ago, Huangfu Yuchen proposed the idea of inviting martial experts from the martial world to teach soldiers martial arts in the military camps to enhance their abilities. Prime Minister Wu expressed opposition, so Huangfu Yuchen asked him to submit a written report with detailed reasons. In the document, Prime Minister Wu pointed out that the martial world emphasizes respecting teachers and valuing traditions, and if martial experts were allowed to teach soldiers, it might blur the boundaries between the martial world and the imperial court. If the soldiers respected the martial experts as their teachers, there might be a risk of the martial experts using that influence to their advantage, thereby endangering the military’s secrets.

Huangfu Yuchen had grown up in the palace, so he indeed lacked a deep understanding of these matters. Additionally, Yan Ge had never traveled in

the martial world, so both of them had overlooked this.

“Your words make sense,” Huangfu Yuchen said, “but then, how can we have the soldiers learn a more systematic martial art if we can’t invite martial experts?”

Prime Minister Wu replied, “I have thought about this as well. It can work if we have a specific set of techniques that the generals can learn and then pass on to the soldiers. This way, we won’t have any connections with the martial world.”

Huangfu Yuchen pondered for a moment and said, “The imperial treasury does indeed have a few martial arts manuals, but it would be too slow to have a few people learn and then teach others. Besides, these manuals might have been learned by martial experts before, as they were tributes from various regions.”

“This…” Prime Minister Wu also felt troubled.

“Let’s leave it for later discussion,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

“Yes, I will take my leave.”

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at the remaining documents, planning to review them later in the afternoon. “Return to Tenglong Palace.”

Under Yan Ge’s influence, Huangfu Yuchen rarely used the dragon sedan chair anymore and preferred to walk at a leisurely pace.

“Where is Yan Guiqing?”

Yan Ge was taking a day off today.

Deng Mande said, “Your Majesty, the Empress has invited Yan Guiqing to the Imperial Garden. He should still be there.”

Huangfu Yuchen frowned but didn’t say anything. Previously, the four consorts asked Yan Ge to find something meaningful for them to do, and he suggested the idea of creating feminine makeup products. The four

Consorts were interested and have been handling the cosmetics business, selling their products through the First Company. Occasionally, they would seek Yan Ge's advice when they encountered some issues. Since the Empress and the consorts were well-behaved, Huangfu Yuchen didn't make a fuss about it.

However, Tian Guiren was persistent, and her presence always irritated Huangfu Yuchen. So half a month ago, he pressured Tian Guiren's father, a fifth-ranked local official, to take her out of the palace.

On arriving at the Imperial Garden, Huangfu Yuchen saw the four consorts behaving properly, standing aside and listening to Yan Ge without huddling together, and he was pleased.

As Huangfu Yuchen approached, the Empress and the four consorts quickly paid their respects.

Except for the Empress, who referred to herself as "this concubine," the other four consorts tacitly omitted such titles.

"Greetings, Your Majesty!"

"Rise," Huangfu Yuchen replied, looking at Yan Ge and asking gently, "Are you done?"

Yan Ge nodded, and the two of them left the Imperial Garden. The Empress and the consorts remained in the pavilion, continuing to discuss the appropriate timing for launching their newly developed beauty cream.

Huangfu Yuchen discreetly glanced back, and felt reassured on seeing no one looking after him or Yan Ge.

Yan Ge chuckled and said, "Don't worry; I can tell they've genuinely moved on. Now, all they're concerned about is developing various beauty creams. Our decision back then was the right one."

Huangfu Yuchen hugged him and kissed his forehead. "You're truly brilliant, my dear."

“Weren’t you dealing with the matter of inviting martial experts to be instructors? How did you manage it so quickly?” Yan Ge asked curiously.

Huangfu Yuchen explained, “I reconsidered it while on the way here. The fundamental martial arts manuals in the treasury are excellent resources. I’ll send someone to investigate whether anyone in the martial world has practiced those manuals. If not, we’ll take them out and use them. If they have, we’ll think of another solution.”

Yan Ge added mischievously, “One becomes wiser with age. Prime Minister Wu had a valid concern. Speaking of manuals, why didn’t you ask if I have any?”

Huangfu Yuchen was taken aback. “You do?”

“The Flowing Sands Sword Technique!” Yan Ge communicated through their voice transmission. “Now that we’ve both reached higher levels of cultivation, the value of the Flowing Sands Sword Technique isn’t as significant. It wouldn’t hurt to share it with others. I could have tens of thousands of disciples. Haha…”

Huangfu Yuchen furrowed his brows. “Baby, I know the origin of the Flowing Sands Sword Technique is remarkable, but wouldn’t revealing it affect you? You know I care about you the most and wouldn’t want anything to happen to you because of this.”

Yan Ge’s heart filled with sweetness, and his eyes reflected his affection, warming Huangfu Yuchen’s heart as well.

This was his treasure—a single look from Yan Ge could enchant him.

Huangfu Yuchen’s concern was unwarranted, but it reminded Yan Ge to think more carefully about any potential drawbacks.

“You’re right, the Flowing Sands Sword Technique cannot be revealed. Once people know that I brought it out, my reputation would rise even more, which would affect your imperial authority.”

Though Huangfu Yuchen wouldn’t mind, having a consort with a reputation surpassing that of the Emperor would lead to various problems and could impact the stability of Great Han.

“But don’t worry, I have other techniques,” Yan Ge reassured.

Back at the Tenglong Palace, Yan Ge accessed the system store. Most of the soldiers used spears and swords, so he found a manual that was easy to learn and versatile for spears, as well as a highly explosive sword technique. He spent 500 taels of silver to purchase them and handed them to Huangfu Yuchen.

“Say you found them in the palace treasury,” Yan Ge suggested.

Huangfu Yuchen held Yan Ge’s face and gave him a kiss before opening the manuals to peruse them. “Your gifts are truly treasures. Both of these manuals are top-notch.”

Yan Ge leaned on his shoulder and said, “I’ve noticed that the Zhantian Vine’s movements have been getting stronger these days. It will leave seclusion in three days at most. Then we can extract more of its essence, which will greatly benefit the soldiers. I’m looking forward to seeing our nation’s soldiers become stronger. If there’s a war in the future, they’ll defeat the enemy effortlessly!”

“It’s all thanks to you,” Huangfu Yuchen replied. Looking at Yan Ge’s lips reflecting a soft glow, he couldn’t resist pecking them once more.

A eunuch’s voice was heard from outside the door, “Announcing Your Majesty, Grand Tutor Song seeks an audience.”

“Let him in,” Huangfu Yuchen said, putting away the manuals.

Yan Ge began peeling an apple on the side.

“Greetings Your Majesty,” Song Chaobang said as soon as he entered the hall, kneeling respectfully, “Long live Your Majesty!”

“Grand Tutor Song, please rise quickly,” Huangfu Yuchen replied.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Song Chaobang said as he stood to the side.

Huangfu Yuchen inquired, “What brings you here, Grand Tutor?”

“This…” Song Chaobang looked at the palace maids and eunuchs inside the hall.

Huangfu Yuchen waved, signaling them to leave.

Only then did Song Chaobang speak, “Your Majesty’s permission to allow this old minister to visit Song Guiren once a month is truly a great favor, for which this old minister is deeply grateful. Yesterday, when I went to see Song Guiren, he told me that Prince Dai has visited him several times with unwavering affection. So, Song Guiren had a request…”

He hesitated to speak, but continued, “This old minister earnestly implores Your Majesty to consider Song Guiren’s recent well-behaved conduct and grant him permission to leave the palace.”

Yan Ge’s hand that was peeling the apple paused imperceptibly before continuing.

Although Song Ruhao’s presence in the cold palace didn’t affect Huangfu Yuchen in any way, it would be better to send him away. After a brief contemplation, Huangfu Yuchen replied, “Grand Tutor, you have been devoted to state affairs and the Crown Prince. How could I not grant your request? I will arrange for Song Guiren to feign death and leave the palace as soon as possible.”

Song Chaobang hadn’t caused any trouble since the last incident, and he had been active in state affairs and teaching the Crown Prince. It wasn’t easy to turn down his request. Besides, even if he refused, Yuhu would come to plead, so he decided to grant the request directly.

Song Chaobang was deeply moved, and his knees fell heavily on the ground. “This old minister thanks Your Majesty! In the future, I will continue to serve Your Majesty wholeheartedly until my last breath!”

“Grand Tutor, please rise. If there’s nothing else, you may take your leave.”

“Yes, this old minister takes his leave.”

After Song Chaobang left, Huangfu Yuchen took the apple from Yan Ge’s hand.

“Baby, I noticed you hesitated just now. Is there something you want to say?”

“It’s nothing. I’m just a little surprised. I didn’t expect Prince Dai to be so infatuated,” Yan Ge said with a smile.

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled, “Perhaps Yuhu and I are both slow to warm up. Once we encounter true love, we can’t let go.”

Yan Ge heard his tone and refrained from saying anything further. He wasn’t sure if it was because of his first encounter with Huangfu Yuhu, which left a bad impression on him, he had always felt a bit uncomfortable around him. It was a difficult feeling to explain—he just didn’t like him.

But Huangfu Yuchen had always been protective of his younger brother, so he kept his opinions to himself. As long as Huangfu Yuhu didn’t cause trouble for him and Huangfu Yuchen, he wasn’t his concern.

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Huangfu Yuchen arranged for Song Ruhao to fake his death and marry Huangfu Yuhu in the identity of another son of Song Chaobang, thereby becoming a concubine.

During the morning court, Huangfu Yuchen congratulated Prince Dai in front of civil and military officials and bestowed a lot of gold, silver, and precious jewels.

Huangfu Yuhu expressed his gratitude with a smile.

“Your Majesty, this minister has a proposal,” Yan Xiaojing stepped forward, “Lately, Your Majesty has been busy with state affairs. I would like to hold a hunting event for you this autumn. What do you think about it?”

Other ministers also thought it was a good idea and nodded in agreement.

Prime Minister Wu said, “In recent years, the development of Great Han in the politic, economic, cultural, education, and military sectors has been stable and rapid, all thanks to Your Majesty’s diligent work and great merits. I also believe that Your Majesty should take some time to relax.”

Huangfu Yuchen thought of Yan Ge, who had never participated in large-scale hunting events, and was tempted. However, he suddenly remembered that Huangfu Yuhu’s arm was injured during hunting, and he worried if it might make him uncomfortable. He glanced at Huangfu Yuhu and saw that he was indifferent, as of he had already let go of the past, so Huangfu Yuchen nodded and said, “It’s a good idea. This matter shall be organized by the Minister of Rites, with assistance from Prime Minister Wu. Great Han’s current development is the result of all your efforts. Minister Yan, make sure to make this hunting event lively and enjoyable for everyone.”

“I will obey Your Majesty’s orders.”

After the morning court, Huangfu Yuhu found Huangfu Yuchen.

“Brother, I’m newlywed, so I won’t join the event. However, if you hunt something valuable, I dare to ask you to send me a share.”

Huangfu Yuchen patted his shoulder, “You won’t be left out.”

When Yan Ge finished work and returned to the palace, Huangfu Yuchen informed him about the hunting event, which piqued Yan Ge’s interest. He would soon start working on gunpowder-related matters, having already purchased the formula from the system store. Huangfu Yuchen had sent people to search for saltpeter, charcoal, and sulfur in various places. Once the necessary ingredients were gathered, they could officially begin. So before that, he had some free time.

“I don’t have hunting gear,” Yan Ge said.

Huangfu Yuchen smiled, “Don’t worry, I will prepare everything for you. Just make sure to set aside those days.”

Five days later, Yan Xiaojing had everything arranged. The Emperor’s travel was not a simple matter. It required organizing the procession, guards, imperial kitchen, logistics, and other aspects to ensure the Emperor’s comfort even when traveling. Past emperors would also bring several concubines when hunting. This time, it was much simpler, they only had to prepare supplies and personnel for Yan Ge alone. Additionally, the accommodations for the accompanying ministers also needed to be arranged.

On the day of departure, the massive convoy left the palace gates at dawn and headed towards the Royal Hunting Ground on Cuiyun Mountain, which was half a day’s journey from the capital. The hunting ground had been closed off year-round and was under the specific care of the court, allowing only elderly ladies to collect herbs but not allowing hunting. As a result, there was an abundance of prey on the mountain, ensuring the Emperor’s

hunting experience would be fruitful. If the Emperor brought the ministers for a hunt and didn't catch anything; it would be quite embarrassing.

Yan Ge, Yan Jin, and the young Crown Prince passed the time by playing cards.

Huangfu Yuchen was not allowed to participate officially, with the excuse that it was to maintain the Emperor's dignity. However, he still playfully disrupted the game, either helping Yan Jin or the young Crown Prince. Yan Ge was so annoyed that he covered Huangfu Yuchen's face with pieces of paper, which led to a good-natured laugh.

Yan Jin and the young Crown Prince couldn't laugh in front of Huangfu Yuchen and turned their heads to suppress their giggles.

Huangfu Yuchen looked at the pieces of paper in Yan Ge's hand that were flying around because of his laughter and couldn't help but smile as well.

This dragon sedan chair was like a small room, equipped with basins, buckets, golden stoves, incense boxes, and more. Yan Ge took a basin and filled it with water.

Huangfu Yuchen thought Yan Ge was going to help him wash his face, so he leaned over, but Yan Ge dipped the towel in cold water and pressed it against his own face.

Helpless, Huangfu Yuchen sighed and had to do it himself.

Around noon, the team arrived at Cuiyun Mountain. According to Huangfu Yuchen, Cuiyun Mountain was lush and green like clusters of green clouds in summer. Now it was autumn, and the lush green scenery was no longer visible, but the autumn flowers, grass, and trees appeared more majestic and profound, exuding a different charm that was equally charming.

A small team had arrived earlier and set up Mongolian yurt-like tents. Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge entered the largest tent, where a charcoal basin was burning, providing warmth. A faint sandalwood fragrance filled

the air, invigorating the spirits. Soft carpets covered the ground, and a soft fur spread on the bed, its white hair tender and warm.

Yan Jin and the young Crown Prince had their own accommodation and left politely.

Deng Mande stood outside the door and said, “Your Majesty, hot water is ready. May I ask if His Majesty and Yan Guiqing will bathe first or have a meal first?”

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “We’ll bathe first.”

After speaking, he turned to Yan Ge and said, “Xiao Ge, taking a hot bath will be more comfortable.”

“Yeah, I’ll get the clothes.” Yan Ge said.

After bathing, both of them changed into riding attire. The imperial kitchen was very diligent and promptly sent lunch just after they finished bathing. Despite being in the wilderness, the food was first-rate and no different from what they would have in the palace. There were delicacies such as braised duck, bird’s nest red and white duck soup, chicken stir-fried with winter bamboo shoots, poached fish slices, five-flavored steamed gluten, spicy shrimp broth, and more, all exquisite and delicious.

After the meal, they took a short nap before leaving the tent.

The ministers were already waiting on the flat ground in front of the tent.

Huangfu Yuchen waived their salutes and said, “The ministers can keep the game we catch today. The time limit is before sunset. The top three with the most game will be richly rewarded!”

The ministers were delighted. The rewards were not the most important; the key was the honor of receiving rewards from the Emperor himself. Moreover, Great Han Kingdom valued literature the most in the past, but now it emphasized both literature and military. Some young military officials might gain the Emperor’s favor if they performed well in hunting.

After the ministers took their leave, they mounted their horses and quickly rode off, disappearing into the woods.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen also mounted their horses, accompanied by several guards, and headed into the forest. The guards were mainly responsible for carrying arrows and the game they caught.

Yan Jin and the young Crown Prince also had small bows and participated. Each was paired with a skilled guard.

Not far into the forest, Yan Ge saw a deer.

He quickly shot an arrow, but it missed the target.

Yan Ge: "…"

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled lightly.

Yan Ge said, "I was just warming up."

"Mhmm," Huangfu Yuchen nodded solemnly, but the amusement in his eyes increased.

Yan Ge glanced at him irritably. He rarely used bows and arrows, so it was normal to miss, right?

Huangfu Yuchen poured fuel on the fire, "Xiao Ge, how about we have a competition? The winner can ask the loser to do something." He calculated that if he won, he could gain some benefits from his beloved.

"Okay," Yan Ge was determined to save face.

Huangfu Yuchen immediately said, "If I win, you have to agree to the thing you refused me to do last night."

Yan Ge glared at him again, but his competitive spirit was aroused. "Fine! If I win, you have to cook for me for a month."

“…Deal! The competition ends at sunset. No matter the size of the game, the one with more catches wins. If the quantity is the same, the one with the heavier game wins,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

“No problem,” Yan Ge rode ahead and picked up the arrow that missed as he passed by.

Huangfu Yuchen teased, “It’s a good idea to pick it up; otherwise, you might run out of arrows if you keep missing the game.”

Yan Ge became more frustrated and slapped Yunyi’s buttocks. Yunyi quickly ran a few steps ahead.

A wild pheasant in the grass heard the sound of hooves and was startled, and it flapped its wings to escape.

Yan Ge raised his bow and aimed, then shot, hitting the pheasant accurately. He looked at Huangfu Yuchen proudly.

Huangfu Yuchen praised him, “Impressive!”

Yan Ge was about to reply when he saw a deer flash past from behind the bushes ahead and quickly rode after it.

“Yuchen, let’s split up!”

The four guards caught up swiftly.

Huangfu Yuchen had no choice but to call out, “Be careful!”

“I know.”

Huangfu Yuchen watched his figure disappear and said to the remaining four guards, “Let’s go in the other direction.”

“Yes!”

Yan Ge quickly caught up with the deer and shot another arrow. He was very unfamiliar with archery and actually used his qi to cheat.

His qi locked onto the game, making the movements of the prey appear in slow motion in his eyes, making it easy for him to hit the target.

“ Yan Guiqing’s archery is godlike, and we admire you greatly,” one guard picked up the game, pulled out the arrow, and returned it to Yan Ge, expressing admiration.

Yan Ge remained composed, “Practice more, and you’ll be able to do the same.”

The group continued riding forward and encountered two more wild hares, a wild chicken, and a roe deer.

“There are number of wild animals here,” Yan Ge said.

One guard replied, “Indeed. Animals also have intelligence; they know this place is usually free of people, so they like to settle in Cuiyun Mountain. Gradually, more and more animals gathered here.”

Yan Ge heard that he knew a lot about this place, so he asked, “Are there large animals here, like tigers or leopards?”

The guard replied, “Yes, but they are deeper inside.”

Yan Ge didn’t know the skills of these guards, and he feared they might accidentally venture into a tiger’s lair, so he decided to stop and focus on catching smaller game to win based on quantity.

“Let’s go, that way!”

They returned to the camp only when the sun was about to set.

From afar, Yan Ge saw Huangfu Yuchen sitting at the table, drinking tea, which made him itch a bit. This guy was so confident? He had already returned early.

“Xiao Ge.” Huangfu Yuchen also saw him and waved with a smile.

Huangfu Yuchen had a pile of game behind him, just like Yan Ge's, they were mostly small game like wild pheasants and hares.

"Have you counted yours?" Yan Ge dismounted.

Huangfu Yuchen said, "There is no hurry, it's more comfortable to first take a bath."

The two entered the tent to freshen up.

Yan Jin and the young Crown Prince walked over, a little disappointed. Archery was one of the young Crown Prince's lessons, but this was his first time hunting, and he hadn't caught any game. Yan Jin didn't want to make an outstanding performance, so he also returned empty-handed.

"There are so many game," Yan Jin walked to Yan Ge's catch. He picked up a wild pheasant, and said, "Let's make Beggar's Chicken."

The young Crown Prince became excited, "Brother Jin, can you make Beggar's Chicken?"

"Of course. Let's go over there."

After Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen freshened up, they called the guards to count the game.

"The Emperor caught fifteen game, Yan Guiqing also caught fifteen game."

Yan Ge was stunned, "Impossible! I counted on the way, and there were sixteen."

The guard recounted, "Indeed, it was sixteen."

Yan Ge glanced at Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen pleaded innocence, "Baby, I went in with you just now."

At this moment, Yan Jin and the young Crown Prince approached, each holding a fragrant chicken leg.

“Father, Papa, what are you doing?” Yan Jin asked.

Yan Ge looked at the chicken leg in his hand, “Who gave this to you? It’s burnt.”

Yan Jin replied, “I grilled it myself, it’s a bit burnt, but it’s delicious.” After speaking, he took another bite.

The young Crown Prince nodded in agreement.

Yan Ge asked suspiciously, “Where did you get the chicken?”

Yan Jin pointed to the ground, “I found it here.”

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Yan Ge turned to Huangfu Yuchen
with a triumphant look, “See, I told you it was sixteen.”

Huangfu Yuchen calmly said, “It’s not enough to go based solely on your words. What if you two conspired together?”

Yan Ge looked at him helplessly. Was it really okay for an emperor to be so shameless?

Huangfu Yuchen continued, “So, for the sake of fairness, we’ll cancel the results of this competition and compete again tomorrow.”

Yan Jin saw the situation turning unfavorable and didn’t want to get involved. He grabbed the little crown prince and ran away.

Yan Ge said reluctantly, “Alright, alright, we’ll compete again tomorrow.”

That night, Yan Ge used the excuse of having a competition the next day to decline some nighttime activity with his husband.

Huangfu Yuchen felt as if he had lifted a rock and hit his feet.

The next day, after breakfast, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen competed again as they had agreed, splitting up just like the previous day.

There were many wild pheasants and rabbits in the mountains and forests, and in less than half an hour, Yan Ge had caught nine of them, unknowingly venturing far from the camp.

Focusing on searching for prey, Yan Ge didn’t notice a strange red light passing through the eyes of the four guards, Lu Fei, Jun Xiang, Lin Zhang,

and Jiang Ting. The four of them pulled the reins and surrounded Yan Ge without a trace.

Lu Fei took an arrow from his quiver, aimed the bow, and pointed it at Yan Ge.

Yan Ge heard the sound of something cutting through the air and swiftly avoided it. He turned around and said, “Be careful not to hit each other—” but before he could finish speaking, he saw Lu Fei raising his bow toward him, and he felt surprised.

“Ah Fei?”

Jun Xiang, Lin Zhang, and Jiang Ting also aimed their arrows at him.

“Swish, swish, swish—”

Three arrows shot from three different directions.

“Move!” Yan Ge skillfully controlled his horse, and Yunyi leaped forward two steps. Yan Ge leaned back on the horse’s back and skillfully dodged the three arrows.

Seeing that using arrows wasn’t effective, Lu Fei and the others jumped toward him.

Yan Ge’s eyes narrowed. While he had less interaction with Lin Zhang and Jiang Ting, he knew that Lu Fei and Jun Xiang would never betray him. Their sudden inexplicable attack on him was strange… as if they were being controlled—being controlled?

While evading the attacks of the four guards, Yan Ge focused on sensing the aura around him. He soon detected a faint unfamiliar aura, and his eyes became extremely sharp. He swiftly moved through the group of four, sealing their acupoints. He then turned his sharp gaze towards a big tree against the light and shouted, “Come out!”

A black figure slowly appeared on top of the tree.

“Meng Xiaohun?” Yan Ge looked at him in astonishment. This person looked exactly like Meng Xiaohun, but Meng Xiaohun’s arms had clearly been cut off by Huangfu Yuchen. Why did this person have both arms intact?

“It’s an honor that you still remember me,” Meng Xiaohun spoke slowly, a cold smile on his emotionless face.

“What have you done to them? What do you want with me?” Yan Ge spoke calmly and examined him. He knew that this person might also have a system. He just didn’t know what kind of system it was.

Meng Xiaohun floated down to the ground, standing not too close to Yan Ge, and folded his hands behind his back. “I want you to serve me.”

Yan Ge was taken aback and said disdainfully, “Impossible.”

Complex emotions flickered through Meng Xiaohun’s eyes, making it hard for Yan Ge to discern them for awhile. Those turbulent emotions were quickly suppressed, leaving only anger and unwillingness. “You really won’t consider it? If you refuse to serve me, then I’ll have to kill you!”

“Just you?” Yan Ge looked at him with undisguised contempt, a mocking smile on his lips.

Meng Xiaohun suddenly turned his head and Lu Fei and the other three had painful expressions, with traces of blood at the corners of their mouths.

Yan Ge drew his spiritual sword and aimed it at Meng Xiaohun: “Release them immediately!”

Meng Xiaohun said indifferently, “If you continue to seal their acupoints, they will undoubtedly die.”

Yan Ge had no choice but to release the acupoints of Lu Fei and the other three.

Lu Fei and the others gained their freedom and immediately wielded their weapons to attack Yan Ge.

Meng Xiaohun stood relaxed on the side, watching the battle.

Lu Fei swung his knife at Yan Ge's right shoulder. He had lost control of his own consciousness and was just a puppet. The strike was firm and unrelenting, with no room for mercy.

Yan Ge could only defend himself and was unable to counterattack. After finally breaking free from the four's encirclement, he was surrounded again. Lin Zhang held his double-edged blade, using the "Heavenly Divide" technique to slash at Yan Ge's face. The sword's energy was like black mist, chilling and eerie. It was clearly not Lin Zhang's usual style.

Yan Ge was shocked. Could it be that Meng Xiaohun not only controlled Lu Fei and the others' consciousness but also granted them his abilities?

He decided to test his hypothesis and fought Lu Fei and the others for thirty more moves. He confirmed his suspicion. He had witnessed some of Huangfu Yuchen's battle with Meng Xiaohun before, and the techniques used by Lu Fei and the others were indeed of the same style as Meng Xiaohun's.

Meng Xiaohun said, "Can't bring yourself to kill them? It's not too late to regret now. As long as you agree to follow me, I'll release them immediately. Otherwise, they will definitely kill you."

Yan Ge thought for a moment and said, "How about you release them first, and we'll talk. Why do you value me so much?"

"No need to explore my intentions," Meng Xiaohun said coldly, "Since you remain obstinate—"

Lu Fei and the others' attacks intensified.

While fighting them, Yan Ge discreetly retreated, gradually approaching Meng Xiaohun.

However, Meng Xiaohun was very vigilant and quickly stepped back.

Yan Ge felt something was odd. If Meng Xiaohun could control Lu Fei and the others to kill him, then Meng Xiaohun's abilities should be even stronger, so he shouldn't be so wary of him. Why was he retreating?

"Kill him!" Meng Xiaohun glanced back and ordered Lu Fei and the others in a stern voice.

Lu Fei, Jun Xiang, Lin Zhang, and Jiang Ting's eyes turned red, and their attacks became fiercer.

Seeing Yan Ge being forced to retreat, Meng Xiaohun's eyes filled with madness and excitement as he ordered once again:

"Kill him immediately!"

Yan Ge turned his head and looked at him coldly. He soared into the air, flying behind Jiang Ting, and with a heavy palm, struck his back. Jiang Ting groaned and lost his breath. Yan Ge repeated the process, killing Lu Fei, Jun Xiang, and Lin Zhang as well.

Meng Xiaohun stared at him in shock and suspicion. After a moment, his eyes regained calmness, "I didn't expect you to be able to take action."

"It seems you don't understand me." Yan Ge retorted and leaped in front of him, thrusting his spiritual sword towards him.

Meng Xiaohun's aura suddenly became colder. He mumbled a few words, and his entire body seemed to become illusory, as if wrapped in a circle of black mist. Suddenly, his body twisted into the shape of a fierce dragon, rushing fiercely towards Yan Ge.

Yan Ge snorted, and his spiritual sword was enveloped in majestic spiritual energy as it rushed forward to meet him.

"Boom!"

The two forces collided, producing a deafening sound.

Yan Ge smiled, “I’m curious. If I were to sever your arms, could you still regrow them?”

Meng Xiaohun’s eyes became ferocious, as if he couldn’t help but recall the pain of having his arms cut off by Huangfu Yuchen that day.

As a result, his aura momentarily became unstable. Yan Ge seized this opportunity and ruthlessly stabbed towards Meng Xiaohun’s heart.

Meng Xiaohun hurriedly dodged, his lips moved rapidly, murmuring indistinctly. Two black mists, like black wings, followed behind him fiercely, resembling a violent storm and raging waves.

Having read numerous online novels, Yan Ge wondered if Meng Xiaohun was chanting some incantation. He transformed into a ray of light and fearlessly faced the attack.

“Boom!” All the plants and trees within ten feet collapsed.

In another direction of the mountain forest, Huangfu Yuchen suddenly felt a palpitation, as if something bad had occurred.

“Your Majesty?” The accompanying guards looked at him with confusion as he abruptly halted the horse’s reins.

“Baby?” Huangfu Yuchen tried to call out to Yan Ge in his mind but received no response. The palpitations became even more pronounced, and his expression changed. He turned the horse’s head and swiftly galloped away.

“Your Majesty!” Several guards hurriedly followed.

Yan Ge didn’t sense Huangfu Yuchen’s call. Meng Xiaohun was incredibly powerful, and he couldn’t afford to be careless. He had to concentrate nearly eighty percent of his consciousness on Meng Xiaohun to barely keep up with him.

Meng Xiaohun’s mood was worse than his. He didn’t expect Yan Ge’s strength to be so formidable. As long as Yan Ge wasn’t eliminated, he

wouldn’t be at ease. With this in mind, he used a burst of internal energy to cut open the back of his hand. The crimson blood immediately dripped and condensed into a mass of blood mist in mid-air, eventually forming a peculiar geometric pattern that rushed towards Yan Ge. Simultaneously, it gradually grew larger and flew above Yan Ge’s head before suddenly slamming down heavily.

Yan Ge was well-prepared and infused his qi into the spiritual sword. The sword’s aura was like a fierce and domineering lightning, splitting the strange pattern in half!

“Ptt—,” This pattern seemed to have some connection with Meng Xiaohun. He couldn’t help but spit out a mouthful of blood, glaring at Yan Ge with a mix of anger and hatred, as if looking at a dead person.

Yan Ge was not at ease either, it was as if half of his dantian had been emptied by the rebound of his own attack. He took several steps back in succession before finally stabilizing himself. He quickly rubbed his feet against the ground, stirring up dust.

“Xiao Ge!”

Huangfu Yuchen arrived just in time, firmly embracing Yan Ge’s waist.

Meng Xiaohun’s eyes darkened, and his figure flickered as he quickly fled.

Yan Ge gasped for breath and frowned, looking in the direction where Meng Xiaohun had disappeared.

Was he overthinking things? When Huangfu Yuchen and Meng Xiaohun fought before, it seemed that Meng Xiaohun had avoided Huangfu Yuchen, reluctant to engage with him. Today, as soon as Huangfu Yuchen appeared, Meng Xiaohun immediately left without even exchanging a single blow with him. It was as if he deliberately avoided Huangfu Yuchen. This person must know Huangfu Yuchen very well, so much so that he feared Huangfu Yuchen recognizing him. Who exactly is he?

A person’s face inexplicably flashed through Yan Ge’s mind, and he quickly shook his head.

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“Baby, are you alright?” Huangfu Yuchen anxiously asked Yan Ge.

“I’m fine,” Yan Ge smiled at him, “just depleted quite a bit of qi.”

“You rest here first.” A fierce glint flashed in Huangfu Yuchen’s eyes, and he quickly chased after Meng Xiaohun. Meng Xiaohun’s target was his beloved, and Huangfu Yuchen wanted to see exactly who Meng Xiaohun was!

Meng Xiaohun fled far away, but just as he was about to catch his breath, he suddenly sensed a familiar aura rapidly approaching. Startled, he gritted his teeth, once again used a bit of fresh blood, and vanished into thin air, leaving no trace.

Huangfu Yuchen was a step too late, and he could only watch Meng Xiaohun disappear. He flew to the spot where Meng Xiaohun vanished but found no clues.

“Damn it!” A strong sense of frustration surged in his chest as he angrily swung his hand, causing a large tree on his right to come crashing down, startling countless birds.

Thinking that Yan Ge might be injured, he quickly returned. He took Yan Ge’s wrist, checked his pulse, and inspected his dantian before finally calming down. “It’s not serious, but indeed, a significant amount of qi was lost.”

He looked in the direction where Meng Xiaohun had left, his expression gloomy. “He knew we were hunting here today and that we had separated. Baby, could you see who he really is?”

Yan Ge shook his head.

“Your Majesty, General Lu and his men… they’re all dead…” Four guards who followed Huangfu Yuchen came forward to report.

Huangfu Yuchen’s expression became even more grim.

“They’re not dead.” Yan Ge walked over and touched Lu Fei and the others.

Their breathing instantly stabilized, but it was still very weak.

Yan Ge sent Huangfu Yuchen a voice transmission, “Meng Xiaohun controlled them to deal with me. I had no choice but to forcibly close off their senses.”

Huangfu Yuchen pinched his shoulder and said, “Baby, you did nothing wrong. If you hadn’t acted that way, either you or all four of them would have died.”

Yan Ge looked at Lu Fei and the others and said, “Forcibly blocking their senses caused significant damage to their bodies, almost crippling their martial arts. I want to let them cultivate as compensation.”

Huangfu Yuchen pondered, “It’s acceptable. All four of them are very loyal. But we must also keep some insurance. Just transmit the first two layers of the ‘Heaven and Earth Annihilation Technique.’ In case they harbor ill intentions, we can still suppress them. Today, they can be considered fortunate despite the misfortune.”

Yan Ge said, “You should handle it personally.”

Huangfu Yuchen knew that Yan Ge didn’t want his reputation to overshadow his own. He kissed his beloved’s face without rejecting the care, saying, “Don’t worry, I know what to do.”

He ordered a few guards to carry Lu Fei and the others back to camp. He didn’t mount his horse either, instead letting Yan Ge rest on Bai Guan’s back while he personally held the reins and walked the horse steadily.

Yan Ge couldn’t help but look at him, smiling gently as his thoughts drifted to Meng Xiaohun.

Was he really the person he suspected? Until there was concrete evidence, he couldn’t share his suspicions with Yuchen.

The people remaining in the camp saw Yan Ge sitting on the horse, while the emperor personally held the reins. Meanwhile, Lu Fei and the others were unconscious on horseback, and they were surprised. They quickly approached.

“Your Majesty! Yan Guiqing!” Gao Feng and Gao Yun swiftly arrived by their side, taking the reins from Huangfu Yuchen’s hand.

“Your Majesty, is Yan Guiqing injured?” Deng Mande asked worriedly.

Huangfu Yuchen helped Yan Ge dismount, “Yan Guiqing’s group encountered a fierce beast, and General Lu and his men suffered some minor injuries while protecting him. Deng Mande, instruct everyone to hunt in pairs and be cautious.”

“Yes!” Deng Mande felt a bit skeptical. Lu Fei and the others didn’t seem to be injured by a wild beast, but since the emperor said so, he wisely refrained from asking further.

Those who could survive in the palace or the court were all clever people. Even if they discovered something, they wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t appropriate to do so.

Yan Ge instructed the palace servants to carry Lu Fei and the others down and take good care of them. He handed them a bottle of medicine and asked them to give one pill to each before focusing on their recovery.

Back in the tent, Yan Ge sat cross-legged on the bed, adjusting his breathing. “The Fengyun Immortal Records” were different from ordinary cultivation techniques. Even without a trace of true qi in his Dantian, the technique would automatically run to protect the master. Moreover, his dantian still had a small amount of qi, which could be quickly converted

from less to more, allowing him to endlessly replenish it. Just a short while ago, he and Huangfu Yuchen had both advanced to the Late Golden Core Stage, and the advantage of this was now even more apparent. In preparation for condensing the golden core, there was always a vortex in his dantian that enabled him to absorb spiritual energy from heaven and earth faster and convert it into true essence.

The hunters began returning one after another, preparing to eat lunch before continuing the hunt.

Huangfu Yuchen had Gao Feng and Gao Yun guard the entrance of the tent, not allowing anyone to disturb them. He also instructed the palace servants to prepare hot water before going to the open area to oversee the overall situation. The hunting competition was continued to avoid suspicion.

It wasn't until noon on the third day that Yan Ge woke up from his meditation and saw Yan Jin and the Crown Prince quietly sitting on the carpet, playing chess. He smiled faintly.

"Why haven't you gone out hunting?"

"Papa!"

"Second Master!"

Yan Jin and the Crown Prince ran over, surrounding him on the left and right.

"We wanted to accompany you."

Yan Jin knew about the fight with Meng Xiaohun yesterday. However, Yan Ge was his master, and unless his life was in danger, he couldn't intervene without his master's command. So, he could only stay in place and secretly keep an eye on Yan Ge. After confirming that Yan Ge was safe, he continued to accompany the Crown Prince in hunting.

"Where's your father?" Yan Ge asked.

The Crown Prince replied, “Father is outside. The hunting competition has already ended, and they are now tallying the prey. It’s very lively outside.”

Yan Ge saw they were both eager to go, and he smiled, “You go and see who won. I’ll take a bath and join you later.”

“Yes!” Yan Jin and the Crown Prince couldn’t wait and left.

After bathing and changing into casual clothes, Yan Ge first went to the tent where Lu Fei and the others were resting. They were still unconscious, but the medicine he gave them was very effective. Their pulses had strengthened significantly, and their

Recovery was going well.

After giving some instructions to the palace servants, he headed towards the liveliest place.

“Yan Guiqing is here—”

Huangfu Yuchen stood up and walked over. “Xiao Ge, you’re here. How’s your body?”

“I’m fine. So, who won?” Yan Ge sat together with him on the throne, his gaze sweeping over the piles of prey on the ground. ‘Goodness, the remaining animals in the forest have probably run away.’

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Still tallying.”

With that said, he looked at the people below, who were whispering to each other. He smiled and said, “The civil officials seem to be at a disadvantage. So, we’ll separate civil and military officials and rank the top three in each category.”

The civil officials were delighted, “Your Majesty is wise!”

After the tallying was complete, Huangfu Yuchen rewarded the top three in both civil and military categories.

The ministers only took three or four of the prey back home to let their families taste the fresh catch, and they offered the rest to the emperor.

Huangfu Yuchen accepted without hesitation. Both he and Yan Ge liked wild game, and the meat from these wild animals had a better texture. Any excess meat that they couldn't consume immediately could be dried by the Imperial Kitchen and enjoyed later.

The group broke camp and set off to return to the capital. It was still early, and they would reach their destination before nightfall.

Sitting on the dragon carriage, Huangfu Yuchen finally had a chance to discuss the matter of Meng Xiaohun with Yan Ge.

"We both have similar cultivation bases, and Meng Xiaohun can now almost match you in strength. It's evident that he has made significant progress since last time," Huangfu Yuchen said.

Yan Ge nodded. "Indeed. He hasn't shown up for so long, and suddenly making an appearance today might be a way to test my true strength."

Huangfu Yuchen sighed, "It's just a shame that I'm not strong enough. Otherwise, I would definitely be able to draw him out!"

"Yuchen, don't push yourself too hard. He may become stronger, but we are also getting stronger. Besides, there are two of us, and he can never defeat both of us alone." Yan Ge didn't want to put too much pressure on him. Besides, there was still some doubt in his heart, so he didn't say much. Yuchen was very sensitive and intelligent; he might notice any slip of the tongue, so he had to choose his words lightly.

Huangfu Yuchen replied, "I'll finish any important matters these two days, then I'll go into seclusion."

Since he had made up his mind, Yan Ge's only option was to accompany him. "We'll go together then."

After returning to the palace, Huangfu Yuchen stayed up late to write a simple plan and implemented it during the morning court the next day.

“The northern Yongzhou is severely affected by freezing, and we don’t know the extent of the disaster. I plan to dispatch an envoy to investigate the situation and make reasonable arrangements for relief efforts. Which minister do you think is suitable for this task?”

Huangfu Yuhu stepped forward. Perhaps due to his recent wedding, his face was rosy, and he looked very healthy. “Your Majesty, I’m willing to go.”

Haungfu Yuchen was surprised, “Prince Dai, it will be New Year’s in two months. Yongzhou is far from the capital, and you may not make it in time for the celebration.”

Huangfu Yuhu smiled, “I understand. However, it’s time for me to set aside my playful nature and share the burden with my elder brother. But, I request permission to bring Princess Dai and Concubine Song with me.”

The ministers all laughed.

Huangfu Yuchen also chuckled and glanced at Huangfu Yuhu, saying, “Very well, since you insist, I will appoint you as the envoy. Investigate this matter and report back to the capital promptly. If the disaster is severe, ensure proper arrangements for relief work.”

Huangfu Yuhu knelt down, “I will follow your decree! Your Majesty, rest assured, I will do my best!”

“Rise.” Huangfu Yuchen said, “If any officials neglect their duties or act for personal gain, they will be severely punished.”

“Yes! I will depart today.”

Once he was back in Tenglong Palace, Huangfu Yuchen instructed Deng Mande, “I recall there is a fox fur cloak in the treasury. Go and find it, then have it sent to Prince Dai.”

“Yes.”

The palace staff were efficient, and the cloak was quickly brought out and carefully cleaned.

Upon seeing it, Yan Ge asked casually, “Why did you dig this out?”

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “Yuhu is heading north, and I realized that both of us have no use for this cloak, so I had it sent to him.”

Yan Ge was taken aback, “Prince Dai is heading north? Is there something going on?” He wanted to investigate Prince Dai’s residence tonight, but unexpectedly, he got this news.

“Yongzhou is severely affected by the cold, and he volunteered to go as an envoy to inspect the situation. It’s rare that he wants to share my burdens, so I agreed. I just didn’t expect him to take his wife and concubine along on the mission. I don’t know what to say to him.” Huangfu Yuchen shook his head as he spoke. Although his words were blaming, his tone was indulgent.

Yan Ge was deeply worried. If Huangfu Yuhu wasn’t Meng Xiaohan, it would be fine, but if he was indeed Meng Xiaohan, he was concerned that Yuchen might not bear the blow.

His fists unconsciously clenched. Huangfu Yuhu, I hope you won’t disappoint Yuchen and me! Otherwise…

“Xiao Ge? Xiao Ge?” Huangfu Yuchen gently shook his beloved’s arm, “What are you thinking?”

Yan Ge returned to his senses and smiled at him, “Nothing, just thinking about how much colder it is in the north compared to the capital. I hope Prince Dai’s journey goes smoothly. I have some pills to withstand the cold; have them sent along.”

“Thank you, my love.” Huangfu Yuchen kissed his forehead.

Yan Ge took the initiative to deepen the kiss, capturing Huangfu Yuchen’s lips and softly sucking on them. “Yuchen, I’ll always be by your side.”

Huangfu Yuchen was momentarily stunned, then smiled contentedly and hugged him tightly. “Of course, we’ll always be together. Even if you want to leave, I won’t let you go.”

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A young eunuch cautiously walked into the hall. “Reporting to Your Majesty, the palace maids taking care of General Lu have sent a message. General Lu and the others have regained consciousness.”

“Oh? Summon all four of them, as well as Yang Zhuo, Gao Feng, and Gao Yun, to see me,” Huangfu Yuchen put down his pen.

“Yes.”

Deng Mande poured warm water into a hand washing basin and handed it over.

Huangfu Yuchen washed his hands, picked up a cup of tea and took a sip, slowly contemplating what else needed to be done before he went into seclusion.

“General Yang, General Lu and General Jun are here—”

Yang Zhuo, Gao Feng, Gao Yun, Lu Fei, Jun Xiang, Lin Zhang, and Jiang Ting entered the hall together, bowing to Huangfu Yuchen.

“We, your humble subjects, pay our respects to Your Majesty. Long live Your Majesty!”

“Rise.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Huangfu Yuchen had all the attendants leave the hall, even the shadow guards were dismissed. Only Deng Mande was left.

Yang Zhuo, Gao Feng, and the others felt their hearts skip a beat. His Majesty must be about to discuss something of great secrecy.

Huangfu Yuchen glanced sharply at Lu Fei, Jun Xiang, Lin Zhang, and Jiang Ting. “Lu Fei, you four must already know what happened to you.”

Lu Fei replied, “Your Majesty, regarding this matter, the four of us have no memory. We only heard that on that day, we were protecting Yan Guiqing during the hunting, and encountered a fierce beast. We got injured while protecting Yan Guiqing.”

They all sensed something strange in this matter; it was possible that they got injured while protecting Yan Guiqing, but the fact that all four of them lost their memory about the incident was too strange.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, “That’s correct. You four were injured because of Yan Guiqing, which partially crippled your martial arts.” As he spoke, he observed the four men closely, not missing any subtle changes in their expressions. If they showed any resentment towards Yan Ge, they wouldn’t qualify for cultivation.

Lu Fei and the others were startled and knelt down simultaneously.

“We pledge our unwavering loyalty to Your Majesty and Yan Guiqing. We are willing to give our lives and serve Your Majesty and Yan Guiqing. Our martial arts might be partially crippled now, but if Your Majesty and Yan Guiqing don’t abandon us, we will continue to serve you wholeheartedly!”

Huangfu Yuchen was very pleased with their response. “Get up. On that day, one of my and Yan Guiqing’s arch-enemies showed up and harmed Yan Guiqing. He used a secret technique to control you four and attack Yan Guiqing. That’s why you have no memory of the incident. Yan Guiqing didn’t want to kill you, so he had no choice but to forcibly seal off your five senses, which cause a regression in your martial arts. Regardless of your future efforts, your cultivation won’t recover.”

Only now did Lu Fei and the others feel sorrowful. “We thank Yan Guiqing for saving our lives.”

Huangfu Yuchen continued, “Because of this, Yan Guiqing feels guilty towards you four. I also acknowledge your unwavering loyalty to me, so I intend to lead you onto a different path.”

Lu Fei and the others were puzzled. A different path?

Huangfu Yuchen picked up a delicate jade bottle in emerald green. “That path is cultivation. Cultivation means… once you reach the highest level, your strength will be a hundredfold stronger than before, or even more, and even ascending to immortality won’t be a mere fantasy.”

Everyone present wore a look of astonishment. Ascend to immortality? They had no doubt that Huangfu Yuchen wasn’t lying because there was simply no need to.

Gao Feng and Gao Yun had witnessed His Majesty and Yan Guiqing’s peculiar skills in the past, but they never thought about immortality. At this moment, they were no less surprised than Yang Zhuo and the others. However, the two of them were the quickest to calm down and exchanged a joyful look.

“These are the Foundation Building Pills needed for cultivation. They can help you remove impurities from your body and expand your meridians.” Huangfu Yuchen’s gaze then fell on Yang Zhuo, Gao Feng, and Gao Yun. “Yang Zhuo, Gao Feng, and Gao Yun are my confidants, so they also have a share.”

“Thank you for Your Majesty’s trust. Your humble subjects will forever follow Your Majesty!” Yang Zhuo, Gao Feng, and Gao Yun knelt down to express their gratitude.

Lu Fei and the others followed suit.

“We also pledge our unwavering loyalty to Your Majesty!”

Deng Mande didn’t hear his name and felt a little disappointed. However, he was energized knowing that His Majesty included him in this matter, it was already a great honor.

“Rise.” Huangfu Yuchen said, “But, you need to understand one thing. The Foundation Building Pills I have are limited, and I can’t take care of your family members. As your cultivation advances, you will forever retain your youthful appearance, but you will have to witness your loved ones age and even pass away. Of course, if you choose to stop cultivating halfway, you will age gradually and won’t ascend.”

Hearing this, Yang Zhuo and the others gradually calmed down from their excitement. As men, they yearned for great power, but what about their family members?

Huangfu Yuchen continued, “So, I’ll give you some time to consider. Come back the day after tomorrow.”

“Now, if there’s nothing else, you may leave.”

“Yes, Your humble subjects take their leave.”

Yang Zhuo and the others left the Tenglong Palace with complex emotions. Tonight, several of them might not be able to sleep.

Only then did Huangfu Yuchen turn to Deng Mande.

“Deng Mande, I have also prepared a Foundation Building Pill for you.”

Deng Mande’s eyes lit up. Realizing that His Majesty hadn’t finished speaking, he knelt down promptly without saying a word.

“However, your constitution is weaker, and even if you start cultivating now, it will be challenging to achieve significant results. It’s not that you can’t cultivate, but your progress will be slower than others, and the danger when encountering the tribulation will be greater. Take your time to consider it.”

Deng Mande knocked his head on the ground, tears flowing from his eyes as he spoke resolutely, “Your Majesty, I don’t need to consider. I want to cultivate too. Since childhood, I’ve been following Your Majesty, and forgive my impudence, I see you as family. As long as Your Majesty and

Yan Guiqing don’t mind, I’m willing to serve you and Yan Guiqing forever.”

Huangfu Yuchen looked at him with emotion, nodding, “Since you’ve chosen this arduous path, I won’t say much more. Rise. When they come the day after tomorrow, I’ll give you the Foundation Building Pill.”

“Yes, thank you, Your Majesty, for your great grace.”

Huangfu Yuchen looked at the eight small jade bottles on the tray. Xiao Ge had given him eight Foundation Building Pills in total, he hoped they would all be worth it.

Outside the palace, in the First Company, Yan Ge’s thoughts were also revolving around the Foundation Building Pills. Regardless of whether Huangfu Yuhu was Meng Xiaohan or not, he absolutely couldn’t give him the Foundation Building Pill. This was also why he only gave eight pills to Huangfu Yuchen. Based on his understanding of Huangfu Yuchen, he would undoubtedly give these eight pills to Lu Fei, Jun Xiang, Lin Zhang, Jiang Ting, Yang Zhuo, Gao Feng, Gao Yun, and Deng Mande.

Unfortunately, Huangfu Yuhu had already left the capital, otherwise, he could try to secretly monitor him.

Two days later, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen waited together in the Tenglong Palace for Yang Zhuo and the others.

After a difficult mental journey, the temperament of Yang Zhuo and the others had changed considerably, undoubtedly showing more determination than before.

Yan Ge was sure that even if they chose not to cultivate, except for Lu Fei and the other four, the martial arts of the rest would easily break through their bottlenecks.

“So, have you all considered it?”

Gao Feng, Gao Yun, Lu Fei, and Jun Xiang knelt down together, “Your humble subjects are willing to cultivate.”

Yang Zhuo, Lin Zhang, and Jiang Ting followed suit.

Yang Zhuo said, “Your Majesty, thank you for your kindness, but this subordinate can’t bear to leave his family. Please forgive me.”

Lin Zhang and Jiang Ting also said, “We, your subordinates, also thank Your Majesty for your kindness. Like General Yang, we can’t abandon our families. Please forgive us, Your Majesty.”

Huangfu Yuchen knew that Lu Fei and Jun Xiang were not yet married. Lin Zhang and Jiang Ting were older than Yang Zhuo. Lin Zhang’s son was already eight years old, and Jiang Ting’s son and daughter were seven and four years old, respectively.

“You value your families and kinship. What fault is there?” Huangfu Yuchen said, “Lin Zhang and Jiang Ting were injured for the sake of my beloved. The Foundation Building Pill will still be given to you. It can repair your meridians, and you will continue to serve me in the future.”

Lin Zhang and Jiang Ting were overjoyed and knelt down to express their gratitude.

Huangfu Yuchen gave them the Foundation Building Pills, saying, “After taking the Foundation Building Pill, you will experience intense pain. Find a safe and secluded place to take it later.”

“Yes.”

“Alright, General Yang, you may rise.”

“I take my leave.”

After Yang Zhuo and the other two left, Huangfu Yuchen gave the Foundation Building Pill to Gao Feng, Gao Yun, Lu Fei, Jun Xiang, and Deng Mande. Then he placed his palm on their foreheads, imparting the

first two levels of the “Heavenly Demon Annihilation Technique” into their consciousness.

Upon receiving the cultivation technique, Gao Feng and the others realized the profound and miraculous nature of cultivation. They were deeply moved and became even more respectful to Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge. They all lowered their heads in unison, “We pledge our unwavering loyalty to Your Majesty and Yan Guiqing!”

Huangfu Yuchen explained some important points about cultivation and then dismissed the five of them.

He and Yan Ge also needed to prepare for seclusion.

He handed the remaining bottles of Foundation Building Pills to Yan Ge, “Xiao Ge, keep these. We will enter seclusion tomorrow.”

“Alright.”

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Early in the morning, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen arrived at Mingxia Mountain. They quickly focused their minds and entered a state of meditation. As the method from the Fengyun Immortal Records began to operate, the spiritual energy between heaven and earth seemed to respond to the call, rushing over in competition.

The Zhantian Vine that had been serving as a crown on Yan Ge's head sensed something and wriggled its body, starting to absorb the spiritual energy.

The spiritual energy was refined into true qi, rapidly revolving in Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen's dantians, and the vortex grew larger. Time passed, seasons flowed. The true qi gathered together, compressed bit by bit, ultimately condensing into a golden round pill the size of a chicken egg…

In the morning court, the civil and military ministers, as well as the six department heads, were discussing important matters.

"Grand Tutor You, Prime Minister Wen, and Prime Minister Wu, could you come up with a plan?" The Minister of Revenue, Chen Guowei, paced back and forth anxiously. "Prince Dai has sent an urgent report. Yongzhou urgently needs two million taels of silver for disaster relief. We've received the report for several days, and we can afford to delay, but the common people in Yongzhou can't afford it!"

Grand Tutor You stroked his beard, "Without the Emperor here, we dare not make decisions hastily."

"The Emperor has been away for over a month. Where did he go, does Grand Tutor You know?" Prime Minister Wu asked.

Grand Tutor You shook his head, “He travels with Yan Guiqing in disguise most of the time.”

“Yan Guiqing ?” Chen Guowei looked at Yan Xiaojing upon hearing this.

Yan Xiaojing replied helplessly, “I don’t know more than you do.”

Jiang Gan said, “Minister Chen’s concerns are not unfounded. If we can’t send the disaster relief silver as soon as possible, the people in Yongzhou will suffer.”

Prime Minister You thought of the consequences if the disaster relief silver couldn’t be sent in time and became anxious, “Although His Majesty instructed us to prioritize urgent matters, he didn’t mention the disaster relief silver. Two million taels is not a small sum, and if anything goes wrong…”

“That’s true.” All the ministers began to ponder.

Suddenly, a calm and majestic voice rang out in the air.

“What has happened?”

They turned around and saw that the Emperor and Yan Guiqing had appeared in the hall at some point. After not seeing them for days, their aura was even more intimidating. Just a casual glance made them feel a chill in their hearts.

“We pay our respects to Your Majesty. Long live, Your Majesty!” They all knelt down and greeted.

“Rise.” Huangfu Yuchen pulled Yan Ge to the seat above and sat down. “Why is everyone so anxious?”

When the Emperor appeared, the officials had a backbone.

Chen Guowei hurriedly explained the matter in its entirety.

“Two million taels?” Yan Ge was surprised. “Has it already been sent?” If Huangfu Yuhu was indeed Meng Xiaohun, he couldn’t be too careless. If the Centipede Organization dared to rob the disaster relief silver, he wouldn’t know where to find regret medicine.

“Not yet. We were just discussing the matter. Two million taels is not a small sum, so we need Your Majesty’s decision,” Chen Guowei said.

“Two million taels,” Huangfu Yuchen frowned. “The cold in Yongzhou is so severe that it requires two million taels of silver for disaster relief?” The treasury of Great Han was currently very abundant, but that money was all he and his baby had worked hard to save, especially his baby. He had put in a lot of effort. Therefore, every expenditure had to be carefully considered.

“Previously, when severe cold occurred in Yongzhou, they only spent five hundred thousand taels for disaster relief. It seems that this year’s situation is indeed more severe,” Grand Tutor You said.

Yan Ge listened carefully to see how Huangfu Yuchen planned to handle the situation, afraid he would be too generous and give away the silver.

After a moment of contemplation, Huangfu Yuchen said, “Send fifty thousand taels first to provide immediate relief. At the same time, wait for further reports. Prepare the remaining one hundred and fifty thousand taels, and if there is an urgent need, send it out immediately. This matter is of great importance, and the Ministry of War must arrange for proper protection during the transportation.”

The Minister of Revenue and Minister of War simultaneously responded, “Yes!”

Yan Ge also felt somewhat relieved. He had underestimated Yuchen. Yuchen was still relatively cautious when it came to dealing with the treasury. However, he couldn’t do nothing knowing that Huangfu Yuhu was suspicious.

“Yuchen, how many people did Prince Dai take when he left?”

The ministers pretended not to hear Yan Guiqing address the Emperor directly by name.

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “There were twenty generals and five hundred imperial guards.”

Yan Ge felt it was easy to handle and suggested, “As far as I know, there are thirteen cities and forty-six counties under Yongzhou, not to mention numerous villages and towns. I am afraid that Prince Dai alone might find it difficult to control the entire province. It would be better to send him more people with this disaster relief escort just in case.”

Huangfu Yuchen transmitted his thoughts with some discomfort, “Why do you care so much about him? You rarely bothered with Yuhu in the past.”

Yan Ge knew Huangfu Yuchen was jealous, and he didn’t you whether to laugh or cry. “I care about the money!”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded seriously and said out loud, “Xiao Ge makes a valid point.”

The ministers agreed with approving nods.

Huangfu Yuchen thought about the Centipede organization that targeted officials and nobles, and his eyes darkened. He said, “Let’s send a thousand imperial guards to escort the disaster relief silver, with General Wei Hao leading the team. Xiao Ge, who do you think is suitable to assist Prince Dai?”

Yan Ge replied, “It would be best to trouble Prime Minister Wen to go there in person.” Jiang Gan was loyal only to Huangfu Yuchen and the most suitable candidate. Besides his father Yan Xiaojing, Jiang Gan was the first person unrelated to Huangfu Yuhu.

He continued, “As you all know, when disasters occur, refugees become restless and it’s easy for conflicts to arise, potentially leading to great calamities. Prime Minister Wen is eloquent and holds a high position; his

presence will stabilize people's minds. With him cooperating with Prince Dai, they will complement each other and achieve greater success."

Huangfu Yuchen looked at him unexpectedly and then smiled, "I didn't expect Xiao Ge to be so insightful. Prime Minister Wen, what do you think?"

Jiang Gan, also known as "Fox," was surprised when Yan Ge called his name but he quickly responded, "This humble official is honored to be valued by His Majesty and Yan Guiqing. I will do my best to fulfill the mission."

Huangfu Yuchen said, "Good. I will appoint you as the assisting envoy. After arriving in Yongzhou, report back as soon as possible. If needed, I will immediately send the second batch of disaster relief silver."

"Yes!"

Huangfu Yuchen then said, "Quickly confirm the route for escorting the disaster relief silver. Only a few should be aware of it."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Jiang Gan replied solemnly.

"For this long journey to Yongzhou, I will send twenty shadow guards to accompany you."

"Thank you for your consideration, Your Majesty. I am grateful and humbled!"

"You may prepare to depart as soon as possible."

"Yes!"

After everyone left, Huangfu Yuchen embraced Yan Ge and asked, "What are you thinking?"

"Just thinking about food," Yan Ge replied after snapping back to reality.

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled, “Alright, let’s go to Liuxian Pavilion and have hotpot.”

They had Xiao Changzi prepare a carriage, and the two of them left the palace. Xiao Changzi would be serving Huangfu Yuchen since Deng Mande had gone into seclusion.

Yan Ge lay on Huangfu Yuchen’s lap pretending to doze off, but in reality, he was contemplating. If Huangfu Yuhu was not Meng Xiaohun, there wouldn’t be any problem sending Jiang Gan to Yongzhou.

If Huangfu Yuhu was indeed Meng Xiaohun, Jiang Gan’s appearance would surely raise suspicion, but Yan Ge wasn’t worried about Huangfu Yuhu creating trouble in front of Huangfu Yuchen.

He and Huangfu Yuhu were like two players in a game. He didn’t dare to tell Huangfu Yuchen about his suspicions of Huangfu Yuhu, and Huangfu Yuhu didn’t dare to easily frame him in front of Yuchen. They both understood that Yuchen cared for both of them, and any carelessness could lead to disaster. So, one could say that his(Yan Ge) move was both daring and clever. As for Jiang Gan, there was no need for specific instructions. After arriving in Yongzhou, he would personally investigate the disaster situation, not because he didn’t trust Huangfu Yuhu but because it was his usual way of doing things.

Huangfu Yuchen looked at Yan Ge’s head and gently stroked his hair. Although Yan Ge rarely interfered in political affairs, he didn’t mind his actions today and wasn’t surprised. However, he felt that something was wrong. But, out of trust in Yan Ge, he readily agreed to his suggestion without asking for the reasons. As long as his beloved was happy, he was happy too. If not for the unique position of the Duanmu family and their loyalty, he would have considered formally making Yan Ge his empress, allowing him to legitimately manage the affairs of the kingdom. However, he knew that Yan Ge probably wouldn’t want that.

*The Duanmu family is the current Empress's family.

If Yan Ge knew what he was thinking, he would probably vomit blood from depression. Yan Ge wanted it, he really wanted it! Because only by becoming empress could he obtain the final level of the cultivation technique!

However, the matter of the final technique is for another time.

The cold wind lifted the curtains of the carriage, and Huangfu Yuchen reached out to pull them up when he saw snowflakes drifting down from the sky.

"Baby, look, it's snowing."

"Really?" Yan Ge immediately sat up and looked out of the window with a smile. "This snow is quite timely. Snowy days are perfect for hot pot. However, I hope it won't be too heavy and affect the delivery of disaster relief silver."

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at the sky. "It shouldn't be heavy."

"Boss, young master, we've arrived," Xiao Changzi said from outside the carriage.

When Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen appeared at the entrance of Liuxian Pavilion, the customers inside the restaurant felt their imposing presence and looked towards them.

Manager Yuan had a sudden realization and immediately guessed their identities. He quickly stepped forward and said, "Two guests, please follow me to a private room."

Huangfu Yuchen took a couple of steps forward, then suddenly stopped and looked sharply at a woman sitting alone at a table in a corner.

Su Qianqian was taken aback. She never expected Huangfu Yuchen's perception to be so keen! Her master had given her countless instructions to be cautious in the capital and not reveal any clues. If she had known, she wouldn't have been greedy for Liuxian Pavilion's food.

With no time to think, she swiftly attempted to escape.

However, Huangfu Yuchen couldn't let her go easily after finally grasping a lead on the Centipede organization. He immediately teleportated in front of her.

Si Qianqian was alarmed and hurriedly tried to escape backward, but Yan Ge had already appeared behind her. He raised his right foot and kicked her away, causing her to crash into a pillar and spit out a mouthful of blood.

The customers In the restaurant were both surprised and startled by the imposing aura of Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, temporarily forgetting to flee.

Huangfu Yuchen caught Si Qianqian by her delicate neck, his voice cold as he said, "You're not bad; I admire your courage." He then used a body restraint technique to immobilize her.

"You..?" The customers were once again astonished. Given the current situation, it seemed that neither offering greetings nor leaving would be appropriate.

Huangfu Yuchen continued, "Manager Yuan, bring a cloth. Don't let her ruin the appetites of our esteemed guests."

"Yes." Manager Yuan quickly brought a tablecloth and covered Si Qianqian with it.

Yan Ge smiled at the shocked customers and said, "No need to panic, everyone. This woman is a fugitive, and her acupoints have been sealed. Just treat her as if she doesn't exist and continue with your meal. We'll deal with her after finishing our meal."

“Oh…” The customers nodded dazedly.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen went to the second floor, ordered a hot pot, and called for a table full of dishes. Both of them had reached the late stage of the Golden Core stage, so even if someone came to rescue Si Qianqian, they would immediately detect it.

Before long, four suspicious men walked into Liuxian Pavilion. They looked around until their gaze fell on the covered object. Recognizing the familiar dress, they were shocked and quickly approached to remove the tablecloth.

Two of them reached out to grab Si Qianqian.

Some customers at a nearby table were about to intervene, but the two men suddenly convulsed as if hit by an electric current. They screamed in agony, fell to the ground, and stopped moving. The remaining two men realized the situation wasn’t in their favor and immediately turned around, attempting to flee. However, they were struck by two hidden weapons from an unknown direction and fell unconscious.

The customers were relieved and resumed their meal.

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After finishing their meal, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen left with Si Qianqian and the four men. Back at the palace, instead of handing them over to someone else, Huangfu Yuchen personally interrogated them.

Si Qianqian stood there motionless, her eyes filled with fear as she looked at Huangfu Yuchen. She had a premonition that if she didn't reveal some valuable information today, she would undoubtedly die.

Huangfu Yuchen held her chin and carefully examined her face. Then, he turned to Yan Ge, saying, "Xiao Ge, her face has indeed recovered completely, it's not just a mask or an illusion. Could it be the work of her master? If so, her master might have the means to restore his arms… No wonder our search for the person with severed arms yielded nothing." He pondered deeply.

Yan Ge nodded but didn't say anything. The time when Huangfu Yuchen lost one arm and Meng Xiaohun lost both arms was too coincidental.

Huangfu Yuchen released his hold on Si Qianqian's chin, and after a moment, he asked her in a low voice, "Who is your master?"

Si Qianqian appeared honest, saying, "Meng Xiaohun."

"I'm asking about his true identity," Huangfu Yuchen stared at her coldly. "It's good that you're not afraid of death. Do you think the scariest thing in this world is death? No, I have a hundred and a thousand ways to make you suffer more than death."

Si Qianqian hastily said, "I only know he's called Meng Xiaohun, I don't know anything else. Really!"

Huangfu Yuchen asked again, “What is your purpose in coming to the capital? Has Meng Xiaohun planned anything new?”

Si Qianqian turned pale and replied, “I can’t say.”

Huangfu Yuchen sneered, pointed a finger at her without touching, and sent a surge of true qi into her body.

Si Qianqian let out a shrill scream and cold sweat dripped from her face. “Ahhh—”

Huangfu Yuchen looked at her expressionlessly, not rushing her.

Unable to bear the excruciating pain in her organs, Si Qianqian spoke intermittently, “He, he… only asked me… to closely monitor the situation in the capital… nothing else… ah—”

Before she could finish her sentence, she suddenly let out an even more miserable scream. Fear filled her eyes, and a red mist quickly enveloped her body.

Yan Ge exclaimed, “Yuchen, be careful!”

“Bang!” Si Qianqian exploded before them like a bomb, and she shattered into pieces!

Huangfu Yuchen quickly formed a barrier with his qi, blocking the splattering blood and flesh from all directions to avoid soiling the Tenglong Palace.

Yan Ge swiftly appeared by his side, inspecting him anxiously, “Are you okay?”

Huangfu Yuchen hugged him and shook his head. He didn’t bother questioning the other four men and directly killed them. If Si Qianqian didn’t know anything, these little minions certainly wouldn’t either.

After having the area cleaned up, Huangfu Yuchen held Yan Ge and sat down on a nearby couch. He clung tightly to him, as if holding onto the

only source of warmth.

Yan Ge was taken aback. Could it be that Yuchen has already figured something out?

“Yuchen.” He wrapped his arms around his lover.

“Baby, am I being too suspicious? I’m actually doubting my own younger brother.” Huangfu Yuchen’s voice carried a hint of sadness and confusion. He didn’t want to doubt Huangfu Yuhu, but Si Qianqian’s face had recovered to such an extent. Even with Yan Ge’s medical expertise, it would be impossible to achieve such rapid restoration unless a secret technique was used. Si Qianqian was just an ordinary person; the only person capable of doing this was her master – Meng Xiaohun, who possessed special techniques. It wouldn’t be surprising if Meng Xiaohun was able to restore his own arms after they were severed. However, Huangfu Yuh’s arm was disabled around the same time as Meng Xiaohun lost his arms. Furthermore, Xiao Ge’s medical skills were renowned in the capital; even the Imperial Physicians often sought his advice. Now, upon closer reflection, if someone genuinely cared about their arms, they wouldn’t give up any chance of healing them. Yet, Huangfu Yuhu refused Xiao Ge’s treatment.

When confronting Meng Xiaohun, Xiao Ge fainted when he got too close. It was possible that Huangfu Yuhu refused Xiao Ge’s treatment to avoid meeting him. In the past, their whereabouts were leaked multiple times, and along with what Si Qianqian said about “the situation in the capital,” assuming Huangfu Yuhu was Meng Xiaohun, all these suspicious points would make sense.

Yan Ge’s heart tightened as he hugged Huangfu Yuchen tightly. He had never seen such a confused expression on Yuchen’s face before, and it made him feel heartbroken. “Yuchen, don’t think too much for now. Regardless of what you’re suspecting, it might all be coincidental. There’s no direct evidence at the moment, right?”

However, it was as if Huangfu Yuchen didn’t hear his words. He murmured, “He’s my younger brother, where did I go wrong? He repeatedly targets the

person I love… why…”

“Yuchen!” Yan Ge looked at Huangfu Yuchen with worry, fearing he might succumb to heart demons. He held Huangfu Yuchen’s face and kissed his slightly cool lips forcefully.

The warmth of his lips brought Huangfu Yuchen back to his senses. Holding Yan Ge’s head, he regained the initiative and kissed his beloved deeply, as if he wanted to engrave the other into his very soul.

Yan Ge gently responded to his kiss, his right palm caressing his back softly.

Huangfu Yuchen’s chilly heart gradually warmed as he embraced his beloved’s waist, his kiss moving from his lips to his closed eyes.

Yan Ge opened his eyes and asked softly, “Feeling better now?”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. “Baby, how about accompanying me on an expedition to Prince Dai’s mansion tonight? I must find out what’s going on.”

“Yes, I’ll be with you,” Yan Ge tightened his grip on his hand.

Huangfu Yuchen held him close, immersed in memories of him and Huangfu Yuhu. They had been close brothers since childhood. He had taken care of this younger brother wholeheartedly, and Yuhu admired him deeply. He was not easily deceived, and it was inconceivable for him to be deceived for over twenty years. He was certain that Yuhu’s feelings for him were genuine. If Yuhu was not Meng Xiaohun, why were there so many suspicions surrounding him? If Yuhu was Meng Xiaohun, Yuchen couldn’t fathom his motives—money? Power? Influence?

Yan Ge understood that Huangfu Yuchen’s emotions were complex. He leaned quietly against Huangfu Yuchen’s chest, holding his hand tightly without disturbing him.

What Yuchen needed now was not comfort or persuasion but companionship.

By the time Huangfu Yuchen came back to his senses, Yan Ge had already fallen asleep in his embrace, his steady breathing gently brushing against his chest. One hand held his hand, while the other held his waist, his serene expression filled with trust and affection. Yan Ge wanted to tell him, ‘you still have me’. This was his beloved; he didn’t want to lose him even if he lost the entire world. Huangfu Yuchen’s cold heart was filled warmth, and he placed a light kiss on his lover’s lips.

He looked outside and saw that it was already dark.

He could hear Xiao Changzi pacing nervously in the corridor, worried but hesitant to come in.

“Wake up, my dear. If you sleep too much now, you won’t sleep at night.”

Yan Ge opened his eyes and quickly became alert, hugging Yuchen’s neck and kissing his lips. He didn’t close his eyes but looked straight at him.

Huangfu Yuchen saw his reflection in Yan Ge’s worried eyes. He slightly curved his lips, and gently sucked on the soft lips. “I’m fine.”

Only then did Yan Ge smile at him, “What time is it now?”

“It’s almost the eighth hour. Let’s eat first.” Huangfu Yuchen instructed for the meal to be served.

After eating, the two of them rushed to Prince Dai’s mansion under the cover of the night. With their current strength, concealing their whereabouts was as easy as turning over their hands. They directly entered the mansion and landed on the roof of the main house.

The mansion was brightly lit, and although the master was not present, the servants were still bustling as usual. The mansion’s guards were patrolling the various courtyards, just like any other day.

“Nothing seems amiss here. Shall we check other places?” Yan Ge asked in a low voice, but he noticed that Huangfu Yuchen’s expression darkened. “What’s wrong?”

Huangfu Yuchen replied in a low voice, “Regardless of one’s rank, the study is always the most important place. Even if it’s not heavily guarded, it should be patrolled more frequently to prevent accidents. However, we’ve been here for almost an incense stick’s worth of time, but the patrol team has passed by the study the same number of times as other places.”

As the emperor’s most trusted noble, there were numerous confidential documents in Huangfu Yuhu’s study.

Yan Ge hoped that Huangfu Yuchen could quickly find evidence on whether Huangfu Yuhu was Meng Xiaohun or not, to give him a resolution. However, emotionally, he worried that Huangfu Yuchen might get hurt if he did find evidence.

The two of them searched other areas, but they found nothing.

Yan Ge thought for a moment, “Yuchen, I think we should add more people to escort the disaster relief silver. Si Qianqian’s appearance in the capital indicates that the Centipede organization might take action. I’m afraid they’ll target the relief silver.”

“We’ll go personally,” Huangfu Yuchen said in a serious tone, “I actually hope they’ll take action. That way, we’ll have some leads to follow.”

Yan Ge noticed that Yuchen’s aura was colder than before, and he hated Huangfu Yuhu even more. Yuchen treated him so well, so why couldn’t he just behave? If he had behaved properly, there wouldn’t be so many suspicions surrounding him!

“Yuchen, you still have me and Yunxi.”

Huangfu Yuchen tightened his grip on Yan Ge’s hand and nodded, “Let’s go back first.”

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At daybreak, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen followed the team escorting the disaster relief northward. Now that the Zhantian Vine had left seclusion, they didn’t need to wield their swords and instead rode it in the sky.

Although Yan Jin could now be further away from Yan Ge, there was still a limit to their distance, so he stayed quietly in Yan Ge’s embrace.

Jiang Gan and Wei Hao’s team had only set off for a day when the three caught up quickly, flying high in the sky and observing the situation below.

Concerned about the situation in Yongzhou, the team traveled swiftly, pushing the horses to their limits. For five consecutive days, nothing happened.

Huangfu Yuchen furrowed his brows. “Could it be that Si Qianqian’s death alerted them?”

Yan Ge was also disappointed. “It’s possible.”

Nevertheless, they intended to continue tracking them. Since they had already followed for this long, they might as well escort them to Yongzhou.

That night, the team camped in a forest on the outskirts. The further north they went, the colder the temperature became. Wei Hao divided the entire team into three shifts for night watch.

Jiang Gan was a civil official, so he didn’t need to worry about the night watch. With shadow guards protecting him, he was the only one who could sleep soundly.

Just before dawn, the Zhantan Vine, which had been floating motionless in midair, suddenly trembled. Ever since it left seclusion, communication with Yan Ge had become smoother. Following Yan Ge’s instructions, it had been monitoring the situation below.

Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, and Yan Jin all became alert and looked down.

Over a hundred black-clad figures stealthily approached the escort team under the cover of night.

Huangfu Yuchen’s aura grew heavy. “They really dared to come!”

Wei Hao and the Imperial Guards were highly vigilant and quickly noticed the situation.

“Someone is robbing the official silver!”

“Protect the silver!” Wei Hao shouted.

Both sides swiftly engaged in combat. The black-clad figures displayed remarkable skills, and within moments, they took down more than a dozen Imperial Guards.

Jiang Gan was infuriated by their audacity. “Shadow guards!”

“Lord Jiang!” Twenty shadow guards appeared immediately.

“Take them down for me!”

“Understood!”

Two shadow guards were responsible for protecting Jiang Gan, while the remaining sixteen swiftly joined the battle.

The black-clad figures were indeed formidable, and Huangfu Yuchen frowned as he saw the Imperial Guards falling one by one. “Xiao Ge, let’s go down.”

Yan Jin stayed on the Zhantian Vine as Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen transformed themselves into the appearance of Imperial Guards and silently infiltrated the battle, mercilessly slaying the black-clad figures.

With their assistance, most of the black-clad figures were quickly dealt with.

When the remaining black-clad figures saw their numbers dwindling, they finally gave up. One of them let out a shrill whistle, and the black-clad figures rapidly retreated, vanishing into the darkness.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen silently disappeared into the darkness without being noticed and returned to the Zhantian Vine, closely following the group of black-clad figures.

The black-clad figures eventually stopped at a mountain temple and remained unaware that they were being followed.

“Master, the leader ordered us to obtain this batch of silver at all costs. I didn’t expect these officials to be so troublesome. What should we do now?”

“What else can we do? If we can’t complete the leader’s orders, death is the only option! Summon another fifty brothers; we must rob the official silver before they reach Yongzhou!”

“Yes!”

“Master, some of those officials are powerful, and there are more than a dozen elite shadow guards among them. I’m afraid that even if we summon fifty more brothers, it will be challenging to deal with them.”

The Master sneered, “If the frontal approach won’t work, we’ll use sneak attacks. I’ve observed them; they only have a few carriages with limited supplies, not enough for a thousand men. They will undoubtedly replenish their provisions in the towns along the way. When that happens, we’ll find a way to poison their food and drinks.”

“Master, that is a brilliant strategy!”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen’s faces turned dark, and even Yan Jin clenched his hands at his waist, staring at them angrily.

These people were beyond lawless; they dared to rob official silver and even attempted to poison the officials sent by the court. They didn’t deserve any mercy!

“Stay calm,” Huangfu Yuchen held Yan Ge’s hand and said coldly, “Wait until the other fifty arrive, and then we’ll catch them all at once.”

“I understand,” Yan Ge sighed deeply. Just the thought that these heartless people might have been trained by Huangfu Yuhu sent shivers down his spine. When did Huangfu Yuhu become so ruthless and cruel?

“Yuchen,” Yan Ge looked at him with concern.

Huangfu Yuchen pulled him into his embrace and gently kissed him, seeking comfort.

Two days later, the “fifty” that the Master mentioned hastily arrived. During these two days, the Master sent someone to the nearest county and obtained the poison.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen calmly observed the black-clad figures. In their eyes, these people were already dead.

“Let’s go. The weather is turning gloomy, and we must hurry to catch up with the officials before it rains or snows.”

“Yes!”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen appeared at the mountain temple’s entrance like invisible winds, blocking their way.

“No need to bother.” Huangfu Yuchen’s aura turned icy, as if he had just emerged from an icy, snowy land.

“Who are you people?” The Master’s expression darkened as he brandished his sword and shouted loudly.

Yan Ge replied, “Assassins. Someone hired us to kill you.” This was the plan he and Huangfu Yuchen had discussed—they planned to kill everyone and deliberately spare the Master, to see if he could lead them to Centipede’s lair.

Lin Qing sneered, not taking the two young men seriously. They seemed to be in their twenties and didn’t seem to have impressive martial skills. “ I’m in a good mood today and don’t want to deal with you. Step aside!”

Huangfu Yuchen gestured with his spiritual sword, and five black-clad figures were instantly slain.

“You!” Lin Qing’s face paled, instantly realizing that he had underestimated these two. “Attack!”

Two black-clad figures immediately stepped forward and attacked Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge.

Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge showed no mercy. To avoid arousing Lin Qing’s suspicion that they had let him go intentionally, they deliberately restrained their strength and engaged in dozens of moves before killing their attackers.

Lin Qing remained composed. “Send in the others!”

This time, twenty men stepped forward. Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen easily exterminated them all.

Lin Qing realized the situation wasn’t favorable. “Who are you people? Who hired you to kill me?”

Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge remained coldly silent.

Lin Qing tried to test them, saying, “No matter how much silver he offered, I’ll offer double to give up this mission. How about it?”

Huangfu Yuchen replied coldly, “Even assassins have honor. Accept your fate!”

Lin Qing quickly dodged backward and signaled others to attack, shouting, “Attack together!”

He himself swiftly escaped.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen waites for him to get far enough before swiftly annihilating all the black-clad figures. They then flew to the Zhantian Vine and followed Lin Qing from a distance.

Lin Qing bought a horse from the county and rushed on the road. After a day, he arrived at another county and entered the “Black Phoenix Hall.”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen followed him to the courtyard where he lived and watched as he wrote a line of words on a piece of paper before placing it in a light green jade bottle. Then, a strange scene unfolded: a green butterfly, seemingly real and ethereal at the same time, flew out of the jade bottle, flapped its wings once, and disappeared without a trace.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen immediately tracked its aura, but they found nothing. The green butterfly had completely vanished!

They exchanged glances but did not make a move. They had seen the contents of the note, Lin Qing had reported to the leader about the failed operation. They guessed that the leader would reply to Lin Qing and arrange the next step.

Sure enough, shortly after Lin Qing washed his face, a green butterfly appeared before him. Lin Qing reached out, and a note fell into his palm. The green butterfly then flew back into the jade bottle.

“See if you recognize the handwriting on the note,” Yan Ge urged Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen didn’t need the reminder and focused on the unfolded note. The instructions on the note directed Lin Qing to organize another

operation, but the handwriting wasn’t Huangfu Yuhu’s.

Strangely, Huangfu Yuchen didn’t feel relieved.

“How is it?” Yan Ge asked.

Huangfu Yuchen shook his head.

Yan Ge also became concerned. He believed there was a high chance that Huangfu Yuhu was Meng Xiaohun. The fact that the handwriting wasn’t his indicated that Huangfu Yuhu was cautious, and therefore, difficult to deal with. The longer they delayed resolving Meng Xiaohun’s identity, the deeper the pain he caused Huangfu Yuchen.

“They will continue with the operation. Let’s go back to the escort team,” Huangfu Yuchen said, “Since we suspect Meng Xiaohun, it’s better to keep a close eye on him.” He couldn’t bring himself to continue calling his brother “Yuhu.”

Yan Ge nodded.

The three of them rode on Zhantian Vine and returned to the escort team.

Due to the previous incident, the atmosphere within the escort team had become even more tense, and the Imperial Guards’ killing intent grew stronger.

Even Jiang Gan couldn’t continue sleeping soundly, becoming more solemn.

After three days of peaceful travel, they were stopped once again. This time, during the daytime.

Jiang Gan and Wei Hao were both infuriated. This was a blatant disrespect for the court and a challenge to the imperial authority!

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen saw the person leading the black-clad figures and both of them were startled—it was Meng Xiaohun!

“Xiao Ge, let’s go!” Huangfu Yuchen said.

The two of them instantly teleported and surrounded Meng Xiaohun from the front and back.

Meng Xiaohun was taken aback, seemingly not expecting them to appear there. He attempted to escape but was intercepted by Huangfu Yuchen’s foot. Huangfu Yuchen thought about how this person had repeatedly targeted his beloved and how he might be his younger brother, and it sent a chill down his heart. He was determined not to give him any chance to escape. With a wave of his right hand, his spiritual sword swung forward, forming a sharp invisible blade that aimed at Meng Xiaohun’s chest.

Meng Xiaohun’s face turned pale. Instead of fighting back, he turned and tried to escape.

However, Yan Ge was behind him, making it impossible for him to succeed. Yan Ge also raised his spiritual sword and struck down from above.

Meng Xiaohun didn’t show Yan Ge any courtesy. He snorted and attacked with both palms at the same time.

Wei Hao, Jiang Gan, and others were all shocked. The Emperor and Yan Guiqing?

The black-clad figures saw their leader engaged in a fight, so they also attacked the Imperial Guards with their weapons.

“Kill!” Wei Hao shouted loudly.

The Emperor and Yan Guiqing’s appearance boosted the soldiers’ morale, and they fought vigorously.

Huangfu Yuchen noticed that Meng Xiaohun didn’t want to fight him, but it didn’t move him at all. This person treating his beloved like this was equivalent to treating him that way. He saw Meng Xiaohun attack Yan Ge without hesitation and his eyes became colder. Without any sentimentality, he raised his spiritual sword and attacked Meng Xiaohun once again.

Meng Xiaohun soared into the air, amd glanced at Huangfu Yuchen, seemingly furious.

He landed in front of Yan Ge, chanted an incantation and his moves became more ferocious, emitting an intense killing intent as if it had a tangible form that enveloped Yan Ge.

Yan Ge slashed his spiritual sword in the air, and a blood mark appeared on Meng Xiaohun's body.

Huangfu Yuchen landed a kick on Meng Xiaohun's back.

Meng Xiaohun was shocked. He realized he was no match for the two of them together, so he tried to fly away.

However, Yan Ge saw through his escape route and landed a heavy palm strike on his shoulder.

Meng Xiaohun was forced to fly backward. Huangfu Yuchen tapped him with his index finger, completely immobilizing him.

The black-clad figures saw that their leader was captured and immediately fled.

Huangfu Yuchen said in a cold voice, "Don't let any of them escape!"

"Yes!"

Wei Hao led the soldiers to intercept, and Yan Ge and the shadow guards also joined the pursuit. Soon, all the black-clad figures were killed.

Yan Ge looked at the blood drops on his sword and smiled faintly. For his beloved, he didn't fear killing.

Huangfu Yuchen stood in front of Meng Xiaohun, staring at him intently.

Meng Xiaohun's expression remained cold and arrogant, without any emotions as he met Huangfu Yuchen's gaze. His eyes were sharp, as if he didn't care at all about becoming a prisoner in their hands.

“I ask you, why did you repeatedly target Xiao Ge?” Huangfu Yuchen said, “And why did you attck the royal nobles and wealthy merchants several times? What conspiracy does the Centipede Organization have?”

“No comment,” Meng Xiaohun said proudly, “Since I’ve fallen into your hands, you can kill or torture me as you please.”

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Yan Ge saw Huangfu Yuchen looking angrily at Meng Xiaohun and walked over to him, using voice transmission to ask, “Yuchen, what’s going on?”

“He looks exactly like the Meng Xiaohun we’ve seen before,” Huangfu Yuchen said, “but I can be sure that he is not Yuhu.”

Yan Ge was puzzled, “Are you saying that Huangfu Yuhu is not Meng Xiaohun?”

Huangfu Yuchen paused for a moment, “I didn’t say that.”

Yan Ge became confused, “What do you mean?”

Huangfu Yuchen patted Meng Xiaohun, “This person is not Huangfu Yuhu, but that doesn’t mean Huangfu Yuhu is not him.”

Yan Ge seemed to understand and asked aloud, “What do we do now?”

“We search his soul,” Huangfu Yuchen said firmly.

Yan Ge nodded. The soul-searching technique caused immense harm to the target, ranging from severe injuries to death. Since Huangfu Yuchen was certain that this Meng Xiaohun was not Huangfu Yuhu, using the soul-searching technique on him was of no concern. They had used it on Si Qianqian once, and she ended up exploding.

Meng Xiaohun’s face showed a hint of shock, “Soul-searching technique?”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen ignored him.

Suddenly, Meng Xiaohun’s lips moved rapidly.

“Yuchen, be careful of his incantation!” Yan Ge warned.

Huangfu Yuchen reacted quickly, placing his right palm firmly on Meng Xiaohun’s head and using the soul-searching technique.

Meng Xiaohun stopped his incantation halfway, coughed up blood, and died on the spot.

Yan Ge reached out to check his breath and confirmed that he was dead. He looked dazed, feeling a mixture of excitement and disappointment, just like someone who won a lottery ticket but realized it was from the previous draw.

Huangfu Yuchen frowned and withdrew his hand, “I only used eighty percent of my strength so it wouldn’t kill him. It might be related to the incantation he was chanting just now.”

Yan Ge didn’t know what to say.

Huangfu Yuchen pondered for a moment, “Let’s discuss it in Yongzhou.”

Jiang Gan, Wei Hao, and the others couldn’t comprehend what had happened, but they noticed the animosity between Huangfu Yuchen, Yan Ge, and the leader of the black clad men. When they heard Huangfu Yuchen’s words, they quickly invited him and Yan Ge to the carriage.

Yan Jin revealed himself at this moment, pretending to have been hiding behind a tree all along.

Jiang Gan widened his eyes, “Jin’er, you’re here too?” It was cold so he didn’t expect the Emperor and Yan Guiqing to bring Yan Jin along.

“I missed Father.” Jin’er happily pounced into his arms.

Jiang Gan was overjoyed, hugging him, “Father missed you too.”

The Zhantian vine slipped into the carriage unnoticed.

The bodies of the black-clothed men had to be left behind temporarily, while Meng Xiaohun's body was wrapped up by Wei Hao and placed in a separate carriage. Although Meng Xiaohun was dead, there were still many unanswered questions. If the people from the Centipede Organization tried to reclaim Meng Xiaohun's body, it might provide more clues.

Inside the carriage, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen remained silent. Both of them were smart men—one a businessman and the other an emperor. Even though Meng Xiaohun was dead, based on the information they had gathered in the past few days, they couldn't rule out the suspicion around Huangfu Yuhu. They had just started tracking Meng Xiaohun when he suddenly appeared before them. It seemed too coincidental.

Yan Ge's mood was not good at all. Ever since Meng Xiaohun appeared in the paddock, he felt that his and Huangfu Yuchen's lives had been thrown into chaos. When he saw Yuchen occasionally distracted, he couldn't help but feel resentful, and even harbored an evil thought: Even if they prove that Huangfu Yuhu is not Meng Xiaohun, he hoped Huangfu Yuhu would leave Yuchen's life so his beloved would have peace.

Huangfu Yuchen noticed Yan Ge's silence, and he embraced him apologetically, "My love, I'm sorry for ignoring you."

Yan Ge shook his head, looking serious, "Yuchen, let me ask you this. If it turns out that Huangfu Yuhu is not Meng Xiaohun, can you treat him as before?"

Huangfu Yuchen gently caressed Yan Ge's cheek and shook his head slowly, "All the doubts about him before can't be mere coincidences. Even if it's proven that he is not Meng Xiaohun, the actions of the Centipede Organization are undoubtedly linked to him. I cannot face him without any resentment."

"That's right," Yan Ge lightly kissed his lips, "From now on, treat Huangfu Yuhu as if he were Meng Xiaohun. When it is confirmed, you won't feel so uneasy."

Huangfu Yuchen smiled wryly, “Baby, you have a unique way of comforting people.”

He paused and let Yan Ge lean against him, “The thing I can’t accept the most is that he repeatedly targeted you. Baby, I must give you and myself an explanation. Let’s not talk about him now. This is your first time going north. Take a look at the scenery outside.”

Xiao Ge’s smile was charming, but in the past few days, he hadn’t smiled much, as he was always worried about him.

Yan Ge also wanted Huangfu Yuchen to feel better, so he followed his lead and looked out of the carriage window.

Huangfu Yuchen hugged him from behind as they both watched the sky slowly fill with small snowflakes. They didn’t speak but quietly savored the warmth of being together with their loved one.

On the journey, nothing else happened, and the group safely arrived in Yongzhou.

From what they saw along the way, it could be concluded that the disaster in Yongzhou was indeed severe, with many towns suffering from severe frost damage, and the common people living in miserable conditions.

“Your Majesty, we are currently in Hexian County. At our current speed, we will reach Yong city in three days,” Wei Hao approached the carriage and reported.

Huangfu Yuchen spoke calmly, “No need to rush to Yong city. Let’s temporarily stay in Hexian County. Prime Minister Wen, General Wei, immediately lead people to investigate the severity of the disaster in Yongzhou.”

Wei Hao was secretly surprised but didn’t reveal it on his face, “Yes!”

Jiang Gan said, “To investigate the real situation, the most effective way is to immerse ourselves among the disaster-stricken people. Your Majesty,

please rest assured; General Wei and I will report back as soon as possible."

"Go ahead," Huangfu Yuchen waved his hand.

Jiang Gan was indeed capable. He and Wei Hao pretended to be refugees and only took one day to thoroughly investigate the situation.

"Report to Your Majesty, General Wei and I have found out that the most severe disaster in Yongzhou is mainly in the northern areas. The common people there have been living in extremely dire conditions. However…" Jiang Gan hesitated slightly. He now knew Yan Guiqing had named him, asking him to come to Yongzhou as well.

"Speak freely," Huangfu Yuchen glanced at him.

Jiang Gan said, "The most severe situation is in Yong City and three other counties. In my estimation, it would require about five hundred thousand to eight hundred thousand taels of silver for disaster relief."

Yan Ge frowned.

The room was so quiet that one could hear a pin drop.

Jiang Gan and Wei Hao were oppressed by Huangfu Yuchen's imperial aura, not daring to breathe. They both understood that it was not surprising for Huangfu Yuchen to be angry; in the urgent report, Prince Dai had stated that two million taels of silver were needed for disaster relief. Why did Prince Dai lie about the figures? Whatever his reasons were, it was an act of deceiving the emperor!

Both of them thought Huangfu Yuchen would erupt in anger, but they heard him speak calmly, "Set off for Yong City in half an hour."

"Yes!"

In Yong City, inside the Prefectural Government Office, Prince Dai sat cross-legged on the bed, eyes closed. Suddenly, he opened his eyes and spat out a mouthful of blood, but his lips curled into a smile.

“Meng Xiaohun” was dead; he was safe now.

He waved his hand gently, and the bloodstains on the floor disappeared without a trace. He reviewed all his plans, confirming that there were no loopholes before setting his mind at ease.

“My lord, why didn’t you go out today? Are you okay?” Song Ruhao pushed the door and entered, showing concern. This man was truly gentle towards him, caring for him, and even brought him along on official business trips. Perhaps, one day, he could truly forget about Huangfu Yuchen and start a new life, even though Princess Dai was quite bothersome.

“It’s nothing. It’s so cold outside; why not rest in the room?” Huangfu Yuhu hugged him close, gently caressing his back. However, his eyes were cold and devoid of any emotions. How could he ever have feelings for Song Ruhao? No matter how beautiful he was, he was still a man. If it weren’t to win over Song Chaobang, he would never have put so much effort into getting Song Ruhao. Unfortunately, Song Chaobang cherished his daughter too much and refused to let her become a concubine.

“My lord?” Someone knocked on the door from outside.

“Is it *Liu Wei? Come in,” Huangfu Yuhu patted Song Ruhao’s back.

*Not to be confused with “Luo Wei”, the Prime Minister of War

Song Ruhao obediently stood up, “ I’ll leave first.”

“Hmm, go ahead. I’ll come see you later,” Huangfu Yuhu looked at him gently.

Once Song Ruhao left, his gentle expression immediately disappeared, “What is it?”

Liu Wei said, “Reporting to Your Lordship, the spies have returned with news that the relief convoy will arrive in three days. However, something said by one of the subordinates caught our attention.”

“Oh?” Huangfu Yuhu’s pupils contracted slightly, “What was said?”

Liu Wei continued, “Official Qiu mentioned that based on the appearance of the carriages, it seems that the amount of silver they carry is less than two million taels—”

“What!” Huangfu Yuhu’s expression remained unchanged, but his mind was racing. He hadn’t been informed of this important detail by the men he sent to rob the relief money! They had overlooked such a crucial matter! He had requested two million taels, but Huangfu Yuchen didn’t fully provide it. Could it be that Huangfu Yuchen already doubted him? The more he thought about It, the more anxious Huangfu Yuhu became. After years of Huangfu Yuchen’s unwavering trust in him, he dared to take the risk of asking for an additional one hundred and fifty thousand taels of relief silver. If Huangfu Yuchen was already suspicious, he would surely send a second envoy. Once they discovered that he falsified the amount of relief silver, all his efforts over the years would be in vain.

“Your Lordship?” Liu Wei looked at him with confusion.

Huangfu Yuhu sat down slowly and waved his hand, “You may leave for now.”

Three days later, the convoy escorting the relief silver arrived in Yong City.

Yongzhou’s magistrate, Qiu Yongcheng, led officials of all sizes to greet them.

Upon seeing the officials’ attire, Wei Hao’s face darkened, and he shouted loudly, “How dare you! His Majesty and Yan have arrived, yet you’re dressed in mourning attire. You deserve death!”

Qiu Yongcheng was taken aback, then hurriedly rushed to the carriage that was protected in the center, crying bitterly, “Your Majesty… Yan Guiqing… this humble subject is guilty, Prince Dai has passed away… I’m guilty, Your Majesty!”

The curtain of the carriage was suddenly lifted, revealing a cold and dignified face. Huangfu Yuchen stared at Qiu Yongcheng, asking in a cold voice, “What did you say?”

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Qiu Yongcheng burst into tears and snot, “Your Majesty…Prince Dai… Prince Dai has passed away…”

The officials behind him followed suit, wiping their tears, “Your Majesty, please accept our condolences…”

Inside the carriage, Yan Ge was still in shock. It took him a moment to come to his senses and he tightly held Huangfu Yuchen’s hand.

Huangfu Yuchen led him off the carriage and said coldly, “Where is Prince Dai now? Lead the way.”

“Yes, yes! Your Majesty, Yan Guiqing, this way, please—” Qiu Yongcheng’s legs were trembling He struggled to get up from the snow, falling repeatedly before managing to stand up.

“Useless!” Huangfu Yuchen scolded.

“Yes, yes.” Qiu Yongcheng wiped his sweat, “Your Majesty, this way, please.”

“How did Prince Dai die?” Yan Ge asked.

Hearing this clear and pleasant voice, Qiu Yongcheng guessed it was Yan Guiqing and didn’t dare to delay. He immediately replied, “Replying to Yan Guiqing, yesterday… Prince Dai received news that the relief convoy would arrive soon. He was very happy and had a few extra drinks. Unexpectedly, there was a fire in the eastern courtyard that night. Poor Prince Dai… was burned… this official is guilty…” Qiu Yongcheng began to cry again. It was unknown whether he was genuinely grieving for Prince Dai’s death or just afraid of facing the Emperor’s punishment.

In a short while, they arrived at the main hall.

Commoners were not qualified to hold funerals for royals. Therefore, Qiu Yongcheng only had Prince Dai's body placed in a silver coffin. Fortunately, it was winter, so the body would not decompose quickly.

Prince Dai's widow and Song Ruhao knelt in front of the coffin, weeping silently.

"His Majesty has arrived——Yan Guiqing has arrived——"

Prince Dai's widow and Song Ruhao prostrated themselves.

Song Ruhao thought about how the first man he loved didn't love him back, and the man he married died shortly after their wedding. The more he thought about it, the sadder and more hopeless he felt. He fainted on the ground but nobody paid attention to him.

Huangfu Yuchen went directly to the coffin and opened the lid with a single palm.

Yan Ge also leaned over to take a look. Inside the coffin was a charred corpse, its figure resembling Huangfu Yuchen, but the face was burnt beyond recognition.

Huangfu Yuchen sent a voice transmission to Yan Ge, his firm tone mixed with indifference and disappointment, "This is not Huangfu Yuhu."

Yan Ge felt a pang of pain in his heart. He turned his head, looking straight into Huangfu Yuchen's eyes, "Yuchen, he's not worth it."

"Mmm," Huangfu Yuchen closed his eyes briefly and when he opened them again, they were clear, "Bring Prince Dai onto the carriage."

"Yes!"

"Qiu Yongcheng, Yongzhou's magistrate, and the incompetent guards shall all be dismissed, investigated and imprisoned for life! The guards shall escort Prince Dao back to the capital for burial."

Qiu Yongcheng cried even more bitterly.

Yan Ge remained silent. This judgment was unfair to Qiu Yongcheng and the others, but he understood that Huangfu Yuchen and Huangfu Yuhu's brotherly feud was a shameful secret of the royal family and could not be exposed. If Huangfu Yuchen didn't punish them severely, others might think he didn't care about his brother Huangfu Yuhu, which would be harmful to the harmony of the court.

Huangfu Yuchen held his hand, "Baby, I know what you're thinking. But there will be a chance to give them a general amnesty in the future." Since being with Yan Ge, his heart was no longer as cold and hard as before because he knew his beloved had a soft heart. In the past, Yan Ge dared not kill, nor did he want to kill. But now, his love could kill those black-clothed men without hesitation, all for him. He was so fortunate to have such a understanding lover.

Yan Ge looked at him with encouraging and supportive eyes, "Yuchen, you're doing the right thing."

Huangfu Yuchen instructed Jiang Gan and Wei Hao, "Prime Minister Wen, General Wei Hao, I leave this place to you."

"Yes, Your Majesty, please rest assured! Please accept our condolences!"

"Your Majesty, please depart——"

Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, and Yan Jin had a quiet ride on their way back.

Back in the capital, Huangfu Yuchen made elaborate funeral arrangements for Prince Dai. The common people didn't know much about Prince Dai, except that he was the Emperor's brother and was deeply cherished by the Emperor. They sympathized with the Emperor and Yan Ge, and many of Yan Ge's business partners and ordinary citizens even sent gifts to the Emperor, hoping to console him and bring him some comfort.

This showed the high esteem in which Huangfu Yuchen was held among the common people. Both Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were pleased about

this. As their cultivation progressed, they grew less attached to money, power, and fame. If it weren't for the young Crown Prince, they would have long retired from the secular world. The love and support of the common people gave them the motivation to govern the court.

However, Huangfu Yuhu's fake death and his unwillingness to explain caused a great blow to Huangfu Yuchen, and he was in low spirits for several days.

Yan Ge was very worried that this incident would become a knot that would hinder his path of cultivating. As long as Huangfu Yuhu didn't die, he wouldn't be at ease either. There were still many things they needed to do and could do.

"Yuchen, come with me."

"Where are we going, baby?" Huangfu Yuchen followed Yan Ge with a smile.

"The saltpeter and sulfur you had people look for has been delivered."

"Oh?" Huangfu Yuchen became interested.

The two quickly arrived at the laboratory of the Ministry of Works. Yan Ge sent everyone away, measured the appropriate amount of saltpeter, sulfur, and charcoal, and skillfully made a very small explosive, about the size of a firecracker.

"Watch this."

He lit the fuse and threw the small explosive into a pit on the ground.

"Boom!"

"Is this the gunpowder you mentioned?" Huangfu Yuchen asked in surprise.

"Yes. If you increase the quantity, it will be more powerful." Yan Ge said. He wiped his hands, then went over to him, holding both of his hands and

gazing into his eyes, “Yuchen, have you ever wondered why Huangfu Yuhu did all this?”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded and said calmly, “Mostly, it’s to usurp the throne.” People always have a purpose in their actions. It was either for money, fame, power or love, and Huangfu Yuhu’s betrayal was no exception.

In terms of wealth, the late Emperor and the deceased Empress had shown as much favor to Huangfu Yuhu as they did to Huangfu Yuchen, so Huangfu Yuhu’s wealth must have been considerable. In terms of love, Huangfu Yuhu went through so much trouble to marry Song Ruhao, but he didn’t bring him along after his fake death, which showed that it wasn’t for love or revenge. As for fame, it was even less likely. Betraying his older brother wouldn’t earn him a good reputation. Therefore, the only answer was power. The Centipede organization looted so much wealth to prepare for some future coup.

“Baby, I know what you want to say.” Huangfu Yuchen pulled him into an embrace, “Now that I think about it, the rise of the Centipede organization coincided with the year when Huangfu Yuchen took a liking to travel. It was my subconscious reluctance to doubt him that caused me not to thoroughly investigate him. He spent so much time and effort, and now he has even faked his death and escaped. It’s clear he won’t easily give up his goal. He will undoubtedly reappear in the future. What you want to say is that we can’t relax, right?”

Yan Ge glanced at him, “Since you understand, why have you been so despondent and unwilling to face the situation head-on? It makes me angry…”

And a bit jealous.

Huangfu Yuchen’s lips twitched. He embraced Yan Ge and said, “I’ve been waiting for my love to come and comfort me. Who would’ve thought my love would be so ruthless and take so long to come to me.”

Yan Ge was speechless.

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled and gently kissed his cheek, “Baby, don’t worry. I’ll be back in court in two days.”

Yan Ge arched an eyebrow, “Can’t it be tomorrow?”

“No.” Huangfu Yuchen slipped his hand into Yan Ge’s clothing and sucked his earlobe, “I will be with you today and tomorrow.”

“Mmm…” Yan Ge shivered all over, trying to struggle. This was not their bedroom, but a laboratory.

“Don’t move. Let me love you properly.” Huangfu Yuchen’s arms tightened around him. His beloved had been through a tough time lately, and he planned to surprise him later.

When Yan Ge woke up, he found himself lying on the dragon bed, with only him in the bed. He felt a little disappointed, but then he heard a low voice outside the bed curtain, “Prepare hot water and porridge. If the Crown Prince or Prince Jin come, send them away.”

“Yes.”

Yan Ge smiled, lazily turning over to lie on his side. He looked through the bed curtain at Huangfu Yuchen, who was dressed in his inner garment. He then turned and noticed a rolled-up yellow edict lying next to the pillow.

He picked it with curiosity and unfolded it: Huang Quiqing!

–“Ding! Congratulations on successfully completing the main mission 11—Being promoted to Huang Quiqing (Imperial Noble Consort) by the Emperor. Mission rewards include-500,000 taels of silver, ‘Fengyun Immortal Records’ cultivation technique up to the Late Nascent Soul stage. Main mission 12—Being promoted to Empress by the Emperor. Mission rewards upon completion: 10,000,000 taels of silver, ‘Fengyun Immortal Records’ cultivation technique up to the Tribulation Crossing Stage. Punishment for mission failure: Deduct 1,000,000 taels of silver. To accept the mission, choose ‘Yes.’ To refuse the mission, choose ‘No.’”

*Ranks in order-Daying, Changzai, Shirén (scholar), Cairen, Guiren, Shiqing, Caiqing (honorable official), Guiqing(Noble Consort), to Huang Guiqing (Imperial Noble Consort).

“Are you happy?” Huangfu Yuchen lifted the bed curtain and lay down beside Yan Ge, tucking a strand of hair behind his ear.

He had made a vow in his heart, he was determined to make Yan Ge his Empress in the future. Even if Yan Ge was unwilling, he would find a way to make it happen.

“Yes.” Yan Ge folded the imperial edict, feeling a mix of happiness and worry as he accepted the mission. ‘The next task is to become the Empress. Damn, who could tell me how I can become an Empress?”

It was not a simple matter but their cultivation was only at the late Golden Core (Divine Transformation) stage now, and there was no urgency to obtain a cultivation technique for the Tribulation Crossing stage.

“What are you thinking about?” Huangfu Yuchen lifted him up and let him lie on his lap, gently massaging his waist.

“Nothing, I’ll take a nap.” Yan Ge closed his eyes, as Yan Jin was communicating to him.

“Master! The system can be upgraded now! After this upgrade, the system backpack will be able to preserve items. Not only that, you will be also be able to sell products in the system store!”

“That’s great. Little Jin, help me see if I can buy more Foundation Establishment Pills after the upgrade is complete, or the recipes for them.”

“No problem.”

Huangfu Yuchen sensed from Yan Ge's unstable breath that he was not asleep. He lowered his head and saw a smile on Yan Ge's lips. He couldn't help but smile too. He didn't ask why Yan Ge was smiling, and continued to massage his beloved.

After about the time it took to finish a cup of tea, Yan Jin's voice rang out again, "Master, the system upgrade is complete. The current progress is 95%. I've searched, and there are Foundation Establishment Pills, but they are a bit expensive. One Foundation Establishment Pill costs 10,000 taels of silver."

A bit expensive? It was very expensive! Yan Ge replied helplessly, "Are there any recipes for the Foundation Establishment Pills?"

"Yes." Yan Jin said, "They are very expensive—wait a moment, let me count the zeros. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven—"

Yan Ge became more and more alarmed as he listened and quickly interrupted him, "Stop! No need to count anymore. I'll have the courage to see how much it is when I've earned more money." Forget it, he'll take it one step at a time. The priority now was the gunpowder.

"Baby," Huangfu Yuchen touched his face, "Don't think too much. I'll take care of everything." He didn't know what Yan Ge was worried about, but whatever it was, they were together, and they would always find a solution.

Yan Ge opened his mouth and bit Huangfu Yuchen's leg.

"Is it delicious?" Huangfu Yuchen chuckled.

Yan Ge licked his lips, and said seriously, "It's not bad."

"Haha…" Huangfu Yuchen caressed his hair, "Enough playing around, you should rest a little bit more."

Yan Ge nodded and closed his eyes.

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“Respectful greetings to Huang Guiqing!”

When the carriage arrived at the entrance of the Yan Mansion, Yan Ge alighted and was taken aback by the organized and enthusiastic greetings from the servants.

All the servants had bright smiles, and their spirits were high, which made him chuckle.

“No need for formalities. Du Juan, reward them.”

“Yes.”

“Thank you, Huang Guiqing!” The voices of the servants became even louder.

Yan Xiaojing, Madam Yan, and Lady Wen personally came out to welcome him.

“Respectful greetings to Huang Guiqing!”

Yan Ge promptly intercepted them, “Father, Mother, Sister-in-law, next time you do this, I won’t recognize you.”

Yan Xiaojing and Madam Yan both glared at him. Naturally, they wouldn’t be so formal with their own son. Bowing was just for appearances in front of outsiders. Yan Ge was now Huang Guiqing, which was a much higher rank and certain protocols were unavoidable. However, since Yan Ge said so, they would let it go next time.

“It’s been almost three years since Big Brother enlisted. Has he written back recently?”

They chatted as they walked.

Madam Yan’s eyes reddened.

“What’s wrong?” Yan Ge was surprised. Could it be that something happened to Yan Su? It was impossible; if Yan Su had any problems, the people arranged by Huangfu Yuchen would definitely inform him.

Yan Xiaojing said calmly, “Your elder brother’s letter arrived two days ago. He intends to serve for three more years.”

“Hmph, he doesn’t even think about his son or his wife!” Madam Yan said angrily.

Yan Ge waved away the servants, “Father, Mother, don’t worry too much. Men all want to achieve something. If it weren’t for—ahem, I would have already established a business empire!”

“Don’t talk nonsense.” Yan Xiaojing glared at him again. Was it so easy to talk about establishing an empire?

“I’m just worried.” Madam Yan sighed, “Your nephew and your sister-in-law also… Why doesn’t your elder brother think about them?”

Yan Ge said calmly, “It’s alright. After I return, I’ll talk to Yuchen and let Sister-in-law and Tiantian follow the army.”

Yan Xiaojing and Madam Yan both brightened up.

Lady Wen’s eyes also shimmered with tears as she cautiously looked at Yan Ge, afraid that he was just speaking casually.

“This is possible?” Madam Yan hesitated, “Ge’er, if you do this, will people think…”

Yan Xiaojing's rationality suppressed his emotions, "I think letting our daughter in law and Tiantian stay for a few months should be enough."

Yan Ge waved his hand and embraced Madam Yan's shoulder, "It's okay, Father, Mother. Can't your son use his connections a bit now that he's become Huang Guiqing?"

Both Yan Xiaojing and Madam Yan were amused by him.

Yan Xiaojing said to Madam Yan and Lady Wen Shi, "You both go see Tiantian; I'll talk to Ge'er."

"Alright, you two go inside quickly. It's cold outside." Madam Yan reminded them before leaving with Lady Wen.

Father and son sat in the hall, and Yan Xiaojing asked, "Ge'er, do you think I should take a step back?"

"Father, absolutely not. If you really did that, you would become a laughingstock." Yan Ge understood what he meant and thought to himself that their family was too honest. If it were someone else's child who became a Huang Guiqing or an imperial consort, the whole family or even the entire clan would have taken advantage of the position to expand their influence and amass wealth. But his family was different; they were all afraid of making mistakes and causing trouble for others.

"Yan Bao—"

*Yan Bao is the official name for the messages the Emperor sends Yan Ge.

Yan Xiaojing quickly stood up.

Yan Ge was puzzled, "I've only been out for a while. What could be the matter?"

"This servant pays respects to Huang Guiqing!" A eunuch stepped into the hall and knelt down swiftly.

"No need for formalities." Yan Ge raised his hand gracefully.

“Thank you, Huang Guiqing. This is from the Emperor for you.”

Yan Ge received the letter, “Du Juan, escort the eunuch out.”

“Yes.” Du Juan responded. Naturally, she would have to give some reward to the eunuch.

Yan Ge opened the letter, and after reading it, he smiled and a sweet smile appeared on his face.

Yan Xiaojing seemed not to be looking but was actually observing from the corner of his eyes. He shook his head secretly, but felt happy for his younger son.

“Father, take a look at this.” Yan Ge handed the top paper to Yan Xiaojing and laughed.

After reading the letter, Yan Xiaojing sighed emotionally, “The Emperor truly values you. Ge’er, you must cherish this.”

“I understand.” Yan Ge smiled, “Yuchen also mentioned you. I just didn’t think of things as thoroughly as he did.”

“What did he say?” Yan Xiaojing was puzzled.

Yan Ge said, “He guessed that you might have thoughts of stepping back and advised you not to. You should consider Tiantian. Tiantian was born into a noble family and will probably take an official path in the future. Having a deep foundation in the court will only be beneficial for him.” Huangfu Yuchen considered the Yan family’s situation after they ascended and crossed the tribulation. Without Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge protecting them in the court in the future, Yan Xiangtian would have to rely on Yan Xiaojing and Yan Su. However, it was too early to talk about ascension, and it was not the time to tell Yan Xiaojing about it, so Yan Ge omitted that part.

Yan Xiaojing pondered for a moment and then smiled in relief, “I see.”

He realized that he was having some hesitation and fear. Could it be because he was getting older? As long as he was true to himself, what did he have to fear no matter how high his position became?

Huangfu Yuchen actually considered so much for his family. Yan Ge felt both happy and moved, and he couldn't sit still.

Yan Xiaojing noticed and made an excuse for his younger son, "Your mother and your sister-in-law will be so happy after hearing about this matter. I don't have time to accompany you today. Just go about your business as Huang Guiqing."

"Father, it seems that you still care more about your elder son." Yan Ge pouted. But he still stood up, and said, "I'm leaving."

"You brat!" Yan Xiaojing was annoyed by him again.

Yan Ge was afraid that his father would take off his shoe and hit him, so he quickly ran away.

At the entrance of the Yan Mansion, Gao Feng and Gao Yun came forward, kneeling on one knee, looking spirited as they said, "Respectful greetings to Huang Guiqing!"

"Oh? Gao Feng, Gao Yun, you're out of seclusion." Yan Ge glanced at their cultivation levels and smiled, "Your aptitude is good; you've already reached the Late Foundation Establishment stage in just a few months. If you have any questions about cultivation, feel free to ask me. Perhaps you'll become senior brothers to others in the future, so be diligent in your practice."

"Yes!"

"Let's return to the palace."

"Yes!" Gao Feng and Gao Yun followed behind the carriage. They exchanged glances, and felt somewhat anxious.

After cultivating, they could truly comprehend how profound Huang Guiqing's cultivation was. Not only that, Huang Guiqing was good-looking, with a great aura. Together with his incomprehensible high-level cultivation, that casual smile was extremely charming. If they liked men, it would have been difficult to resist that charm. This was probably the reason why the Emperor could rest assured leaving them by Huang Guiqing's side. Thinking about the Emperor's possessiveness and jealousy, the two quickly suppressed their wandering thoughts, sat properly on their horses, and looked ahead.

Back in the palace, Yan Ge couldn't wait to see Huangfu Yuchen. Instead of going back to Tenglong Palace, he went directly to the small garden outside the Imperial study.

The palace maids quickly brought hot tea and a warm stove.

After sitting for about half an hour, the meeting in the study finally ended.

Yan Ge looked from a distance through the flower bushes at the entrance of the study. Huangfu Yuchen slowly walked out, his figure looking inexplicably lonely.

With Huangfu Yuhu around in the past, Huangfu Yuchen must have felt more secure since both of them were members of the royal family. But now that Huangfu Yuhu was not here, Huangfu Yuchen could be considered a true solitary man in the court.

"Gao Feng."

"The subordinate is here."

"I remember that the Emperor has a good relationship with a sixth uncle, right?" Yan Ge asked.

Gao Feng thought for a moment, "Are you referring to King Zhong? As far as I know, King Zhong is the brother who was closest to the late emperor. When the current Emperor ascended to the throne, King Zhong put in a lot

of effort in the court. However, because King Zhong has health issues, he rarely appears in public. He should still be recuperating in his palace."

"Do you know what illness he has?" Yan Ge had an idea in his mind.

Gao Yun said, "It seems to be some sort of heart condition, and he can only rest quietly."

Yan Ge was puzzled, "Why didn't Yuchen mention this to me?"

Gao Feng said, "A heart condition is a difficult ailment to cure. Perhaps the Emperor is afraid that it would add pressure on you."

"That's possible." Yan Ge pondered.

As he watched Huangfu Yuchen walk away, Yan Ge quickly stood up and waved at him, "Yuchen!"

Huangfu Yuchen turned around and saw Yan Ge smiling at him from behind the flower bushes. His heart softened, and a smile curved on his lips. He quickly walked over and skillfully embraced Yan Ge.

"Weren't you going out? Why did you come back so soon?"

"To pick you up from work," Yan Ge teased.

"Oh, thank you, baby," Huangfu Yuchen pinched his waist and looked at Gao Feng and Gao Yun.

"Respectful greetings to Your Majesty!"

Huangfu Yuchen gave them a faint glance, then said, "You may leave. Inform Jun Xiang and Lu Fei that they'll be working under the supervision of Huang Guiqing from now on."

"Yes, we take our leave," Gao Feng and Gao Yun felt a shiver down their spines and they quickly retreating.

Yan Ge stared at Huangfu Yuchen, observing his face from all angles.

What?” Huangfu Yuchen playfully draped an arm around Yan Ge, sat down, and even took a sip of Yan Ge’s tea, acting nonchalant.

“I should be asking you what’s wrong,” Yan Ge said.

Huangfu Yuchen hugged him tightly and murmured, “I’m jealous of Gao Feng and Gao Yun. They spend almost as much time with you as I do. Is that not allowed?”

Yan Ge placed a firm kiss on his chin and smiled mischievously, “Well, Deng Mande has spent even more time by your side.”

Deng Mande froze: “…”

Huangfu Yuchen said helplessly, “…I can’t argue with you.”

“That’s right.” Yan Ge raised the corner of his mouth proudly.

Huangfu Yuchen pulled him to stand up, “Let’s go back; it’s cold here. I was just discussing with them…”

The two chatted casually as they walked leisurely towards Tenglong Palace.

The atmosphere was calm, making it unbearable to disturb them.

MCUS Chapter 198

Yalun Mansion in the capital.

King Zhong, Huangfu Yao, held a watering can, carefully tending to the flowers in the pots.

An attendant hurried over, moving swiftly but silently, not making any noise.

“Reporting to Your Highness, Huang Guiqing requests an audience.”

“Huang Guiqing?” The name was like thunder in Huangfu Yao’s ears, he never expected to meet him one day. He showed his surprise for a while before composing himself, “Please let him in.”

“Yes.”

King Zhong then said to another attendant, “Hurry and invite the Princess.”

“Yes.”

Yan Ge nodded repeatedly upon entering the courtyard. The courtyard was not small, but flowers occupied most of the space. It was early March, and many flowers were blooming in a riot of colors, making it a delightful sight. If there were some mist, it would be like a fairyland on earth.

Continuing along the path intentionally left between the numerous flower pots, he saw a man and a woman standing there with several attendants. The man was about fifty years old, with a pale complexion and a thin figure, but he seemed spirited. He was undoubtedly King Zhong, Huangfu Yao. The elegant and graceful woman dressed in the attire of the princess was probably his wife.

Huangfu Yao also sized up Yan Ge, and couldn’t help but admire his appearance and demeanor.

He was graceful, good looking, had a good temperament and a kind heart. No wonder the Emperor doted on him so much. Huang Guiqing’s aura was also formidable, and ordinary people couldn’t suppress him, making him a perfect match for the Emperor. He only brought two guards and two palace maids on this visit, showing sincerity regardless of his status and purpose.

Yan Ge clasped his hands together and greeted them, “King Zhong, Princess Zhong, Huang Guiqing has been impolite.”

“Greetings, Huang Guiqing,” they replied.

As the ranks of Huang Guiqing and King Zhong were equivalent, only standard courtesies were observed.

Yan Ge respectfully waved away their greetings and smiled, saying, “My sudden visit is already an impropriety, yet King Zhong and Princess Zhong personally came to receive me. I am truly humbled.”

“Huang Guiqing overstates. Huang Guiqing’s distinguished presence warrants a grander reception. Please do not take offense, Huang Guiqing and come inside.”

“Please, King Zhong, Princess Zhong.”

Once seated in the hall and the maids had served the tea and left, Yan Ge spoke, “I’ve heard that King Zhong has a fondness for flowers. I’ve brought a potted camellia specifically for you to appreciate, Prince.”

He signaled to Du Juan.

Di Juan unveiled what Gao Feng held.

King Zhong saw the flower in the pot and stood up in astonishment, “This is the ‘Eighteen Scholars’!”

“I am not knowledgeable about flowers, but I’ve heard people say that the ‘Eighteen Scholars’ is a precious type of camellia. This flower’s worth will be truly recognized in King Zhong’s possession. I hope King Zhong will accept it.” These Eighteen Scholars were bought from the system store and wefe really exquisite, with each bloom full of vitality.

“Thus…” King Zhong was enamored by the camellia, “Since that’s the case, I must thank Your Royal Highness.”

On returning to his seat, he said, “Huang Guiqing’s visit must have more purpose than merely delivering flowers.”

Yan Ge nodded, “There’s a reason for everything, and indeed, I have a request.”

King Zhong gestured, “Hehe, I didn’t expect that I could be of assistance to Huang Guiqing as well. Please, Your Highness, speak.”

Yan Ge got straight to the point, “I wish to ask King Zhong to resume attending court sessions.”

“Oh?” King Zhong appeared both surprised and curious, “But I don’t understand why.”

Yan Ge explained, “King Zhong must be aware of the deep bond between the Emperor and Prince Dai. However, since Prince Dai’s passing, I can’t bear to see the Emperor facing the court alone each day. That’s why I’ve ventured to make this request.” Mentioning Huangfu Yuhu still stirred intense feelings within him, but outsiders were unaware and he had to conceal his emotions.

King Zhong was moved, and he nodded silently. It was evident that Huang Guiqing sincerely cared for the Emperor, “Huang Guiqing’s concern for the Emperor is truly heartening. However…”

Yan Ge inquired, “Is King Zhong concerned about his health?”

King Zhong nodded, “Huang Guiqing must also be aware that my health has never been good. It’s precisely because of this that I got the Emperor’s favor to avoid early court sessions. I’ve lived the best of my life, and it’s not that I fear death.”

Yan Ge chuckled, “King Zhong may not be aware that I also possess medical skills.”

King Zhong laughed, “Indeed, I’m aware of that. His Majesty is sympathetic and has long proposed that Huang Guiqing treat me, but I declined.”

Yan Ge was puzzled, “Why is that?” It was probably because King Zhong declined that Yuchen didn’t mention him.

King Zhong replied casually, “It’s not just His Majesty; even the late Emperor had invited various physicians to treat me. They all said that this ailment is extremely hard to cure. Therefore, I surmise that even if Huang Guiqing could cure me, the medicine required would be extremely precious. Hence, it’s better to reserve such medicine for those who need it more.”

“King Zhong’s principles are admirable, and I’m truly impressed.” Yan Ge smiled faintly, stood up, and walked to him, extending his hand. “Why not let me give it a try?”

“This…” King Zhong saw Yan Ge’s confident expression, as if he had a plan in mind, and a glimmer of hope ignited in his heart.

Princess Zhong nudged him discreetly, “My lord, if His Highness is willing, there’s no harm in letting him try.”

“Very well, then. Huang Guiqing, please.” King Zhong extended his hand.

Yan Ge placed a few fingers on his wrist, squinting slightly as he carefully felt his pulse. His expression relaxed a bit, “It’s better than I imagined.”

King Zhong sat up excitedly, “Huang Guiqing, can you treat it? Oh, please, have a seat.”

Princess Zhong clutched her handkerchief in excitement, looking intently at Yan Ge.

After sitting down, Yan Ge said, “I can treat it. May I ask, have the previous physicians instructed you to rest more and exercise less?”

“Indeed,” King Zhong nodded, “Is there something amiss?”

Yan Ge explained, “It’s not entirely amiss. It’s true that those with heart palpitations should avoid vigorous exercise such as running, horseback riding, and climbing. However, basic physical activities are still necessary, like taking walks and normal walking, as long as you rest when tired. Over these years, King Zhong has been in a state of repose, lacking exercise, and his constitution has weakened slightly. But it won’t hinder the treatment.”

“Oh, Your Highness!” Princess Zhong heard Yan Ge’s confident tone and couldn’t help approaching him and clasping his hand, saying, “We…we will trouble you. You don’t know that my lord has suffered much due to this ailment over the years.”

“Princess.” King Zhong gave her a reproachful look, implying she was being impolite.

Yan Ge held Princess Zhong’s hand and smiled, “It’s no trouble. Princess Zhong has a warm personality, which makes me feel close. Moreover, Princess Zhong is a compassionate elder, willing to be close to me; it’s an honor for me.”

Both King Zhong and his wife felt relieved on hearing these words.

Yan Ge continued, “Heart palpitations often have a familial tendency, making it easy to affect descendants. May I inquire if the prince and princess have this ailment? If they do, I can treat them together.”

Princess Zhong couldn’t help but wipe her tears, nodding repeatedly, “Not hiding anything from Huang Guiqing, the crown prince also has heart palpitations, though not as pronounced as my lord’s. My lord and I often worry that it might worsen in the future.”

King Zhong sighed and bowed deeply to Yan Ge, “Thank you so much, Huang Guiqing!”

Yan Ge evaded, “King Zhong’s gratitude is excessive. I haven’t brought my usual medical equipment today. I’ll come again tomorrow.”

Both King Zhong and his wife were eager to share the good news with their son, so after exchanging a few more words, they saw Yan Ge off.

“By the way, regarding this matter, I want to surprise the Emperor. I hope King Zhong and Princess Zhong won’t reveal it beforehand.”

King Zhong and his wife exchanged smiles.

“Rest assured, Your Highness.”

Yan Ge felt a bit embarrassed. He nodded to them, then boarded the carriage back to the palace.

Huangfu Yuchen returned to the Tenglong Palace after the morning court session. Hearing that Yan Ge was in the laboratory, he went to the lab and knocked on the door, “Baby?”

“Wait a moment,” Yan Ge’s voice sounded muffled through the door.

Huangfu Yuchen raised an eyebrow; this was the first time such a situation had arisen. He couldn’t help but be curious about what his beloved was doing. But he didn’t rush; he patiently waited.

After about half a cup of tea’s time.

“Baby?”

“Wait a bit longer.”

After one cup of tea.

“Baby?”

“Are you still there?”

Huangfu Yuchen’s forehead twitched, “…”

Deng Mande stifled a laugh.

After about one incense stick’s time.

“Baby?”

“I thought you had left. Wait a bit longer.”

Huangfu Yuchen could tell that Yan Ge was simply playing with him, deliberately keeping him in the dark. He could only say, “Alright, I’ll go have a meal first. We’re having hot pot for lunch today.”

There was no response from inside, and he could only shake his head and leave.

Early the next morning, after Yan Ge had finished breakfast, he brought Du Juan and another palace maid named Hai Tang, Gao Feng, Gao Yun, Jun Xiang, and Lu Fei, to King Zhong’s place.

King Zhong, Princess Zhong, and the crown prince Huangfu Yuhong were waiting at the entrance.

Yan Ge exclaimed in surprise, “What have I done to deserve the honor of making King Zhong and Princess Zhong wait so long?”

“This humble official greets Huang Guiqing,” Crown Prince Yuhong bowed respectfully.

“No need for formalities, Crown Prince,” Yan Ge replied.

“Huang Guiqing, please come in.”

“Please.”

Because Yan Ge often roamed outside the palace, Crown Prince Yuhong had seen him before, but this close contact made him realize that this Huang Guiqing possessed extraordinary bearing. However, he was an outsider, so he refrained from staring and quickly averted his gaze.

Yan Ge sensed the fleeting glance that landed on him and he had a good impression of this crown prince who adhered to decorum.

Inside the hall, he got straight to the point. After examining King Zhong's pulse, he said, "The Crown Prince's condition is not necessarily the same as King Zhong's. I need to diagnose it by checking his pulse."

Crown Prince Yuhong respectfully bowed, "I'm indebted to Huang Guiqing, and I'm truly grateful."

Yan Ge then examined his pulse, nodded, and smiled at King Zhong. "The Crown Prince's condition isn't severe. King Zhong and Princess Zhong can rest assured."

Princess Zhong patted her chest, sighing in relief, "That's good, that's good."

Yan Ge took out two jade vials from his medical kit, "The root cause of heart palpitations lies in the weakness of the meridians connecting to the heart. These pills can help both King Zhong and the Crown Prince expand and strengthen these meridians. King Zhong, one pill, and the Crown Prince, half a pill. After about one incense stick's time, I will perform acupuncture to assist. This treatment every three days will lead to complete recovery within a month. You'll be just like any ordinary person."

King Zhong, Princess Zhong, and the crown prince were all overjoyed when they heard these words.

Especially the crown prince; he had always admired those who went horseback hunting, envying their experiences. But he'd never had the chance to participate because both King Zhong and Princess Zhong were concerned about his health. Now, thanks to Huang Guiqing, he felt a sense of rejuvenation.

“But…” King Zhong hesitated, “this acupuncture…” He was hesitant. After all, Huang Guiqing was a person of the emperor, and he and the crown prince were outsiders. It wasn’t appropriate to reveal their bodies before Huang Guiqing.

Yan Ge quickly understood his concerns and smiled faintly. “Prince, you’re worrying too much. I can perform acupuncture over clothing.”

King Zhong didn’t doubt it at all. Given the dangers of heart palpitations, even a slight mishap could prove fatal, but he believed Huang Guiqing must possess the necessary skills; otherwise, he wouldn’t take such risks.

“I see, I was overthinking. Haha…”

Yan Ge clarified everything that needed to be said, “Since these pills are for expanding and strengthening the meridians, there might be a slight sensation of pain. However, it will be within a tolerable range. King Zhong, Princess Zhong, and the crown prince needn’t worry.”

King Zhong nodded and promptly took a pill, while the crown prince took half a pill.

As the pills reached their abdomens, they did feel the pain. Both King Zhong and the crown prince trembled slightly. Their faces turned pale, and tiny beads of sweat formed on their foreheads.

Seeing this, Princess Zhong felt worried, but since Huang Guiqing had already forewarned them about this reaction, she refrained from asking. She didn’t want to seem like she doubted Huang Guiqing’s words. If he had the ability to cure her husband and son’s illnesses, it was a great favor, and she didn’t want to offend him.

“I’m fine,” King Zhong chuckled.

The crown prince added, “I’m fine too.”

Yan Ge still checked their pulses in confirmation, “Their pulses are normal.”

Princess Zhong finally let out a sigh of relief.

After one incense stick's time, Yan Ge opened a silver needle case and deftly inserted the silver needles into King Zhong and Crown Prince Yu Hong's bodies.

King Zhong observed Yan Ge's skilled movements, noticing how his hands worked independently without interfering with each other. This increased his confidence and admiration for him. It was indeed a great fortune that such a talented person was born in Great Han.

Crown Prince Yuhong had milder symptoms. As the number of needles increased on his body, he quickly felt the pain lessening. Additionally, a vague warm current flowed gently through his body, making him feel warm all over. He couldn't help but exclaim in amazement as he looked at Yan Ge.

"How is it, Yuhong?" Princess Zhong inquired anxiously.

Crown Prince Yuhong reassured her with a glance, "I'm perfectly fine, Mother. His Highness's medical skills are truly remarkable. I feel very comfortable now."

Little did he know that Yan Ge's pills weren't ordinary pills; they were specially concocted with two spirit materials. Moreover, Yan Ge had infused a bit of true qi into King Zhong and Crown Prince Yuhong's bodies along the path of the silver needles. This helped them expand their meridians without causing pain. However, this cost a great deal of resources. Once King Zhong recovered, he would live a long life—living up to one hundred and twenty or thirty years wouldn't be an issue. Being young, Crown Prince Yu Hong would benefit even more. He would be free from major illnesses in the future and enjoy longevity as well.

After a short while, King Zhong also nodded in agreement, "I feel great as well."

At this point, Yan Ge had finished inserting all the needles. "Both of you can sit down now. Just don't move around recklessly."

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After an incense stick's time passed, Yan Ge collected all the silver needles.

Both King Zhong and Huangfu Yuhong were covered in sweat, but they felt incredibly light, as if a heavy burden had been lifted from their bodies.

Naturally, they expressed their gratitude once again.

"King Zhong, Princess Zhong, and the Crown Prince, there is no need for excessive formalities. I will come again in three days. During these three days, have light meals and avoid strenuous exercise, but it's alright to take a stroll," Yan Ge advised.

"Don't worry, we'll remember," King Zhong assured him.

Yan Ge's regular disappearances for half a day made Huangfu Yuchen quite frustrated. He asked, but Yan Ge would just mysteriously reply, "I won't tell you." Huangfu Yuchen found this situation both amusing and exasperating. He loved Yan Ge's lively demeanor, and even though he hadn't received answers after asking multiple times, he had decided not to inquire further. Whatever Yan Ge was up to, he would eventually tell him.

Moreover, he had been busy himself recently, and the busier he and Yan Ge were now, the sooner they would be able to free themselves from their responsibilities.

"Reporting to Your Majesty, King Zhong requests an audience."

Huangfu Yuchen blinked in surprise. He set aside the documents he was reading and stood up. "King Zhong? Please, let him in."

“Hoho…” King Zhong strode into the study with a hearty laugh, respectfully bowing. “This subject pays respects to His Majesty!”

“Sixth Uncle, please have a seat.” Huangfu Yuchen walked over and supported him. “It’s windy today. Why did Sixth Uncle personally come? A message through a messenger would have sufficed.” While speaking, he examined King Zhong and was somewhat surprised. His complexion was much better than last time. He had a healthy flush, bright eyes, and an appearance that differed little from that of a healthy person. Thinking of Yan Ge’s recent secretive behavior, he had a vague gues.

King Zhong chuckled and was in high spirits. “Your Majesty can’t tell?”

Huangfu Yuchen understood and nodded affirmatively. “It’s Xiao Ge.” As for why Yan Ge had suddenly established a connection with King Zhong and secretly cured his illness, Huangfu Yuchen figured it out with a slight thought. The cool and distant gaze when facing outsiders softened unconsciously. Perhaps his beloved, whom he couldn’t help but want to integrate into his bones, had hidden this from him as a surprise.

Seeing his expression, King Zhong smiled gently. “This old official will start attending court more often. Your Majesty, don’t find me bothersome if I appear frequently. Hehe…”

“How could that be?” Huangfu Yuchen said with sincerity, “With Sixth Uncle sharing my burdens, I could not ask for more.”

King Zhong remarked, “Huang Guiqing is not only brilliant and kind, but also wholeheartedly devoted to Your Majesty. Your Majesty and Huang Guiqing working together will undoubtedly achieve great accomplishments for generations to come, leaving an enduring legacy!”

King Zhong’s high praise of Yan Ge filled Huangfu Yuchen with pride and satisfaction. He flashed a confident smile, his demeanor exuding pride for his beloved.

King Zhong had always been dedicated to the kingdom and had unwavering in loyalty. That’s why he had been bestowed the title of “Zhong” (loyal) by

the late Emperor. Under King Zhong's guidance, his crown Prince exhibited similar qualities. Now, father and son treated Yan Ge as their benefactor, which would only make them more loyal. With King Zhong sharing his concerns, the future would be much smoother.

That very day, Huangfu Yuchen prepared a decree to call King Zhong and Huangfu Yuhong back to court.

After dealing with King Zhong's matters, Yan Ge started to handle company affairs. However, he hardly managed the company's affairs nowadays. First, he had already earned enough money, and the kingdom's treasury was also abundant, so he didn't need to work for additional income. Secondly, national matters were more important to him now.

He gradually handed over all the company affairs to the competent managers he had trained, and only needed to listen to summary reports occasionally.

His energy was now focused on national affairs and the system. He was particularly interested in the new selling feature in the system store. He had put some ordinary soil on display and within a short time, he had earned 100,000 taels! Did money come so easily?!

As for who the buyers were and what they needed the soil for, he had no idea. The transactions were completed through the system, which was always honest. He had even joked, "Perhaps the buyers are people from other spaces, and to them, the soil from this planet is as valuable as gold."

As for why the buyers' currency was also silver, Yan Jin had explained that the system had a hidden "currency conversion" function. The buyers might not have paid in silver; the system automatically converted it for him.

Yan Ge silently praised the system for being user-friendly.

He didn't have much curiosity to investigate further, nor was there a need. As long as he earned money, that was enough.

However, when he put the soil up for sale again, no one bought it.

He experimented with other items and ended up staying in the company until late. The palace gates had already been locked but with his current ability, he could easily fly in, so he wasn't too concerned and leisurely packed up before leaving.

As soon as he stepped out of the company's gate, someone hugged his waist, and his butt was quickly pinched. Feeling the familiar aura behind him, he refrained from punching.

"Is it fun to ambush people?"

It was already dark, and there were no other pedestrians nearby, so Huangfu Yuchen directly kissed Yan Ge on the lips, "I wanted to surprise you too."

Yan Ge heard him say "too" and understood.

He asked Gao Feng, Gao Yun, Jun Xiang, and Lu Fei to go back and just wait at the palace gate tomorrow morning, then the two of them walked shoulder to shoulder back to the palace.

It wasn't the first time Huangfu Yuchen picked Yan Ge up after work, but it was the first time they walked back to the palace after dark. It felt somewhat novel for both of them. They chatted as they walked, as if the road would never end, and the darkness wouldn't bother them. Because the person beside them was always by their side.

"Did you wait for long?" Yan Ge asked.

Huangfu Yu Chen said, "Not too long."

Curious, Yan Ge inquired, "Were you busy today?"

"Now that King Zhong's health has recovered, he naturally needs to come back to court as soon as possible." Huangfu Yuchen replied confidently.

Yan Ge chuckled lightly, not feeling too guilty. After all, King Zhong was still young, and it's fulfilling to have things to do.

Under the moonlight, Huangfu Yuchen looked at the smiling face and felt his heart racing. He glanced around, and seeing that no one else around, he pulled his lover into an alley to have a passionate kiss and explore his body with his hands.

Yan Ge widened his eyes. Was this the behavior an emperor should have?

Huangfu Yuchen thought to himself, ‘it seems I didn’t kiss him deeply enough.’

Soon, Yan Ge was so engrossed in the kiss that he couldn’t think about anything else. He lifted his hands to embrace the man’s neck, immersing himself in the joy the man brought him.

Huangfu Yuchen simply lifted Yan Ge and teleported them back to the Tenglong Palace.

MCUS Chapter 200

Due to Huangfu Yuchen needing to attend the early court session, Yan Ge rarely woke up earlier than him. After waking up and seeing Huangfu Yuchen still asleep, Yan Ge found it strange.

Ever since they started sharing the same bed, Huangfu Yuchen would always hold him. Even now, his right arm rested on Yan Ge's waist, his expression calm and his eyes closed, appearing harmless.

Yan Ge playfully twisted Huangfu Yuchen's face, but there was no response. His eyes flickered, and he deliberately revealed a trace of killing intent.

Huangfu Yuchen woke up almost simultaneously, quickly pulling Yan Ge to his side and striking fiercely towards the direction of the killing intent with his left palm. His sharp eyes swept the room with lightning speed.

"My waist…" Yan Ge was pressed beneath Huangfu Yuchen, and felt like crying without tears. What playing a joke on Huangfu Yuchen? It was entirely self-harm.

"Baby," Huangfu Yuchen now understood what happened, feeling both amused and exasperated. He quickly embraced Yan Ge, giving him a slap on his buttocks before massaging his waist. As his hand touched the smooth skin, he continued, "Let's see if you'll dare to misbehave again."

Yan Ge raised an eyebrow, sat up, and gently patted Huangfu Yuchen's arm while smiling at him. "Lie down."

"What for? Isn't your waist hurting?" Huangfu Yuchen asked puzzled.

"Lie down," Yan Ge urged.

Huangfu Yuchen turned over and lay down on the bed. He turned his head and said, “Baby, lying like this is not good for that area, it will affect your happiness.”

Yan Ge sneered, removed the offending garment that was under his foot, and knelt on the bed. He hugged Huangfu Yuchen’s legs and pressed them in the direction of his back with force.

“Ah!” Huangfu Yuchen let out a groan.

Yan Ge laughed, then swiftly jumped off the bed, almost tripping on the bed curtains. With a quick and silent flip in the air, he landed silently on the ground.

Huangfu Yuchen straightened his legs in pain, slowly moving his waist as he stiffly turned his head. “Baby, you are really ruthless.”

“Let’s see if you slap to hit me there again,” Yan Ge adopted Huangfu Yuchen’s tone and said leisurely.

Under the flickering lights, his mischievous expression became more apparent. Huangfu Yuchen’s gritted his teeth, and he slowly sat up while supporting his waist.

“Is it really twisted?” Yan Ge took two steps closer and asked with concern.

Huangfu Yuchen smiled. He wanted to trick Yan Ge over and slap him on the butt, so he nodded without hesitation.

However, Yan Ge’s tone changed, “Then should I help you twist it back?”

Huangfu Yuchen: “…”

“Haha!” Yan Ge laughed joyfully. He flashed to the dressing table, and took a comb from the side to tidy his hair.

Huangfu Yuchen remained expressionless as he said, “I was planning to take you to a good place today, but I changed my mind now.”

Yan Ge's eyes lit up. If Huangfu Yuchen said it was a good place, then it must be truly remarkable. He quickly moved closer to Huangfu Yuchen, sitting next to him on the bed. He leaned his head against Huangfu Yuchen's shoulder, "I was wrong. How about you twist my waist instead?"

Even though his submissiveness was a pretense, Huangfu Yuchen's heart softened. His indulgent smile flashed in his eyes as he pinched Yan Ge's face gently. He hoped his beloved would always be this happy.

"Twist it later tonight," he said with profound meaning.

Yan Ge stiffened.

Now Huangfu Yuchen couldn't help but laugh. He patted his leather belt, stood up to change clothes, but felt a momentary pain in his waist.

Yan Ge was startled and quickly supported him. "Did you really injure yourself?"

"I strained the muscle," Huangfu Yuchen looked at him helplessly.

Yan Ge gave an awkward smile. He watched him clutch his waist and felt a bit amused. He turned his head to the side to hide his smile.

Huangfu Yuchen shook his head. He summoned the palace maids to bring the wash tools. After the items were arranged, the palace maids performed a silent bow and withdrew.

Yan Ge finished brushing his teeth, cupped Huangfu Yuchen's face and bit his lips lightly "Today's first kiss!"

Huangfu Yuchen held the back of his head, kissed him fiercely and finally let go when he was satisfied.

Yan Ge licked his slightly painful lips, glared at Huangfu Yuchen and went to wash his face.

After finishing their morning routines, they had breakfast together. Yan Ge practiced martial arts while Huangfu Yuchen went to the court. Huangfu

Yuchen would come back to pick him up after court.

On arriving at Taihe Hall, he found when all the officials had gathered, and the young crown prince was standing at the front of the line in his princely attire. He had been attending court sessions for a while now and occasionally assisted Huangfu Yuchen in handling governmental affairs, while his studies were scheduled in the afternoon. Under Huangfu Yuchen's strict requirements, the young crown prince had become very disciplined.

"Your Majesty has arrived—"

"Your humble subjects/son pay respects to Your Majesty. Long live, the Emperor/Father!"

"Rise."

"Thank you, Your Majesty/Father Emperor."

Deng Mande repeated the customary words as he had done for years, but his spirit was still vigorous. "If there is any matter, report, otherwise, court is dismissed—"

Minister Chen Guowei stepped forward, "Reporting to Your Majesty, last year's harvest taxes from various regions have been compiled. Thanks to the effects of the 'Maifan Stone,' agricultural taxes increased by thirty percent compared to the previous year. The average rice yield per mu increased by two hundred catties, which is truly gratifying."

Huangfu Yuchen smiled faintly, "Very good. All personnel at the Agricultural Experimentation Department will be rewarded."

"Thank you, Your Majesty!"

King Zhong stepped forward after him, "Reporting to Your Majesty, the development of Great Han Kingdom is thriving, and we need more talents. I believe it is necessary to open a new imperial examination."

His words received nods from several ministers. Currently, Great Han was flourishing in agriculture, defense, and culture. They often felt understaffed

when dealing with their tasks.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “King Zhong’s suggestion is reasonable. Now that it is already May, when would be the appropriate time to hold the imperial examination according to King Zhong?”

“Nowadays, various regions are connected by cemented roads, making travel convenient. However, the territory of Great Han is vast, and even the furthest provincial students would take nearly a month to reach the capital at a normal speed. In my opinion, the examination could be held in the late August,” King Zhong answered confidently.

King Zhong had considered the matter of the imperial examination carefully, replying without hesitation and in an organized manner. “Setting the time more generously would not only facilitate our communication with the regions but also allow the students ample time to prepare. What does Your Majesty think?”

Huangfu Yuchen praised, “King Zhong has thought it through thoroughly. In that case, the imperial examination will be scheduled from August 21 to August 29. Students from remote areas will be subsidized for their travel expenses. The local officials will advance the funds, and the court will reimburse them afterward.” With the treasury full, he would not be stingy when generosity was called for.

“Understood. Your Majesty’s benevolence is a blessing to the people,” King Zhong sincerely praised.

Huangfu Yuchen asked, “Does anyone else have anything to report?”

No one spoke.

Huangfu Yuchen said coldly, “Are you all done? There is one more thing on my side. I heard a few days ago that the Governor of Taozhou married four concubines within a month, and three of them were seen crying on the day they entered his household. I wonder which of you ministers is interested in investigating this matter and telling me this fascinating story!”

“Who is the Governor of Taozhou?” A somewhat puzzled minister asked the person next to him.

Several ministers secretly glanced at the Duke Lu.

“He is Duke Lu’s brother-in-law.”

Duke Lu’s face had turned pale long ago. He anxiously stepped forward and reported, “Reporting to Your Majesty, I humbly volunteer to investigate this matter thoroughly.”

Ever since his son started working for Huang Guiqing, he had made quite a number of achievements, gaining genuine friends in the process. As his father, he gained more fame, and more opportunities to be involved in government affairs. Naturally, his chances of meritorious service increased, and the Emperor had taken notice of him to some extent. Unexpectedly, his brother-in-law still failed to grasp reality and abused his status in the capital, behaving recklessly and even forcing himself upon common girls. Although the Emperor’s policies had become somewhat lenient in recent years, he would never show mercy when punishment was due. He still ruled with an iron fist. It was ridiculous that his brother-in-law didn’t understand this, digging his own grave! He only learned about the matter a few days ago and had intended to handle it before the Emperor received the news. Unexpectedly, the Emperor was informed so quickly, making him both impressed and alarmed. He was also secretly grateful that he never had any evil intentions or deeds.

Huangfu Yuchen snorted, “Very well, I’ll be waiting for your report.”

“This humble minister shall follow Your Majesty’s command.”

The young crown prince looked at his father, who was decisive in rewards and punishments, and his eyes shone with admiration. The seeds of worship gradually sprouted, growing into a sapling that would eventually become a towering tree.

With no one else reporting matters below, Huangfu Yuchen gestured to Deng Mande and left.

“The court is dismissed—”

Huangfu Yuchen returned to the Tenglong Palace, met Yan Ge, and they left the palace together.

Gao Feng, Gao Yun, Lu Fei, and Jun Xiang were waiting at the palace gate. They immediately bowed and greeted, “Greetings, Boss, Young Master!”

Along with them were Jiang Gan, Luo Wei, and Wei Hao, all dressed in casual attire.

“Greetings, Boss, Young Master!”

Several inconspicuous carriages were parked on the side.

“Get in the carriage,” Huangfu Yuchen said. He entered the front carriage, followed by Yan Ge.

Gao Feng and the others followed on horseback.

Yan Ge was intrigued by the mysterious and he asked, “Yuchen, where are we going?”

“You’ll know when we get there.”

Not falling for it, Yan Ge calmly lay on his shoulder and said, “Then I’ll take a nap.”

Huangfu Yuchen: “…”

He could only pat Yan Ge’s waist gently, sitting sideways to make him more comfortable.

The carriage left the capital and headed towards the outskirts, getting farther away from the city.

Yan Ge noticed that some guards occasionally looked back to check for any followers, and his curiosity was piqued. He looked up at Huangfu Yuchen,

who looked as if he was waiting for him to ask, but he turned his head and focused on the scenery, determined not to inquire.

The carriage left the cemented road and headed into the deep forests of the mountains. Yan Ge became even more curious, so he flew out of the window and stood on top of the carriage, enjoying the breeze and admiring the scenery. He looked left and right, trying to figure out where they were going. This place was already dozens of miles away from the capital and quite remote. He had never been here before.

Jiang Gan and Luo Wei were shocked and the corners of their mouths twitched. ‘Huang Guiqing, you are sitting on the Emperor’s dragon head!’

They glanced at Huangfu Yuchen who was sitting by the window. On seeing the doting smile on his face, they kept their composure, and pretended not to notice.

After sitting alone on top for a while, Yan Ge became bored and returned to the carriage.

Huangfu Yuchen naturally made room for him. “Do you want to play chess for a while?”

“Okay.” Yan Ge nodded.

The two played a few games of chess, and time passed quickly.

Soon, the carriage stopped.

“Boss, Young Master, we’ve arrived. We can only walk from here.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s stern voice came from inside the carriage, “Understood.”

But no one came out.

Everyone dared not rush them and waited silently, knowing that the Emperor was playing chess with Huang Guiqing.

Sure enough, Yan Ge’s gleeful voice soon rang out, “I won.”

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at the chessboard and turned it around. “Yes, yes, you won.”

The two got off the carriage.

Yan Ge faintly heard a few familiar explosions from deep in the mountains and couldn’t help but ask, “Was that the sound of bombs?”

Huangfu Yuchen held his hand and led him up the mountain, “Yes. I’ve had a military base established here.”

A military base! Yan Ge’s eyes lit up.

Huangfu Yuchen continued, “The people inside don’t have a chance to come out for a long time. In other words, besides them, only the people here know about this.”

Jiang Gan, Luo Wei, and the others understood that the Emperor’s words were meant for them. If the news leaked, it would be their fault! They all froze in shock. There was no need to express their loyalty with words, they just had to show it with their actions.

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After nearly half an hour, they finally climbed to the mountaintop. Everyone here was either a Military officer or a guard. All were skilled in martial arts, so climbing was not difficult. However, seeing the Emperor and Huang Guiqing not only showing no signs of fatigue but also maintaining steady breath and leisurely steps, they couldn't help but admire their profound cultivation.

Yan Ge looked down the mountain. The base was situated in a basin surrounded by mountains. Tall walls enclosed the area, with orderly and strict architectural planning inside. Soldiers with large swords patrolled the area, four watchtowers were positioned in the southeast, northwest, and other directions, enabling surveillance of activities beyond the walls and on the surrounding mountains. Near the base's foothills, some experiments were underway, occasionally emitting plumes of smoke. This was the source of the explosive sounds earlier.

Though the location was well-hidden, there were still some deficiencies. Yan Ge contemplated, and guessed that Yuchen had other plans.

"Let's go down and take a look," said Huangfu Yuchen.

Descending was easier, and soon they reached the base.

The gate guards brandished their spears and stopped them, asking, "Who goes there?"

Huangfu Yuchen presented a token, and they lowered their spears, saluting promptly.

Huangfu Yuchen waved his hand, leading Yan Ge, Jiang Gan, Luo Wei, and Wei Hao, directly towards the area where the experiments were conducted.

Gao Feng and the others did not follow. For some military secrets, the people who knew, the better.

“This humble official pays respects to the Emperor!” One man with a stern face noticed them and walked over quickly.

Huangfu Yuchen said, “No need for formalities. Xiao Ge, this is Wang Meng, who is responsible for researching the grenades.”

“This humble official greets Huang Guiqing.” Wang Meng loved tinkering with weapons and had a natural talent for them, which was why he was in charge of this project.

“There’s no need to be overly polite,” Yan Ge observed the wooden cart beside him. It had compartments containing various strange-looking grenades. They were separated to prevent accidental explosions due to shock.

Clearly, the experimenters were cautious.

“How is the progress?” Huangfu Yuchen inquired.

Wang Meng replied, “Following the directions given by the Emperor, we have successfully developed lethal grenades and smoke grenades. We were just testing the anti-riot grenade.”

Jiang Gan, Luo Wei, and Wei Hao were a bit bewildered. They knew about grenades, as they had showcased gas bombs to the foreigners in the military exercise before. But what were lethal grenades, smoke grenades, and anti-riot grenades?

Huangfu Yuchen was more informed than them; Yan Ge had shown him a real grenades.

“So, the lethal and smoke grenades have been successfully developed? Demonstrate them for us,” Yan Ge expressed keen interest, deeply admiring these intelligent ancient people who could move the world if you just give them a lever.

Wang Meng knew Yan Ge was highly favored by Huangfu Yuchen, but he still had to get the Emperor's consent. After glancing at Huangfu Yuchen and receiving his nod, he said, "Yes, Huang Guiqing."

He spoke to his assistant, who quickly ran off and returned with a small wooden box, handing it to Wang Meng.

Wang Meng opened the box, which had two grooves, each containing a peculiar-looking grenade.

Both grenades were nearly identical, with only slight differences in the shape of their upper fuses.

Wang Meng first took out the triangular one and introduced, "This is the lethal grenade. After removing the safety ring, it will explode approximately three breaths later, causing severe casualties to living beings within a radius of two feet."

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. "Show us."

Wang Meng immediately moved to a spot a bit away from them, removed the safety ring, and threw the grenade about four or five feet away. After a moment, the grenade made a loud "bang" upon landing, followed by rising smoke and dust.

Juang Gan, Luo Wei, and Wei Hao were startled, their bodies tensing up from shock.

Once the smoke dissipated, a pit appeared on the ground.

"Very good," Huangfu Yuchen's face showed satisfaction. "Now, try the smoke grenade."

Wang Meng picked up the smoke grenade, introduced it briefly with a sense of pride – after all, it was made under his supervision. "The smoke grenade releases thick smoke, which is highly effective against enemies and can also be used for our side's retreat. Your Majesty, the smoke is denser, so I'll step back."

After walking away and sensing the wind, Wang Meng threw the smoke grenade, which indeed released billowing smoke, just as he had said.

Jiang Gan and the others were amazed, realizing that their kingdom's defense capabilities would soon reach a higher level, and they showed delighted expressions.

"How is it? They did pretty well, right?" Huangfu Yuchen smiled and asked Yan Ge.

Yan Ge didn't hesitate to praise, "Indeed. I didn't expect that just by pointing them in the right direction, they could achieve this level."

Huangfu Yuchen asked Wang Meng, "Were there any difficulties in the current experiments? Speak freely."

Kneeling on one knee, Wang Meng said, "Reporting to Your Majesty, about ten days ago, one worker suffered a leg injury due to an accident. The physician did his best to treat him, but his left leg is still paralyzed. This person is agile and diligent, but while making the lethal grenades, he exerted too much force. I beg Your Majesty to grant him some compensation for his injury."

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, "That's only natural. After returning, you should let everyone know that if they are injured in the line of duty, the court will never abandon them. Making grenades is indeed very dangerous, so please be careful in the future to avoid casualties."

"Yes! Thank you, Your Majesty!"

"Alright, let's take a walk around."

"Yes."

Huangfu Yuchen intended to use this base for a long time. It had laboratories, factories, barracks, training grounds, and a dining hall, among other facilities.

Yan Ge noticed that the capacity of the barracks was much larger than the number of stationed troops. He looked at Huangfu Yuchen and said confidently, “You have other arrangements for this place, don’t you?”

“That’s right.” Huangfu Yuchen hugged his shoulder and said through voice transmission, “We’ll create an extremely powerful army using the sap of the Zhantian Vine.”

“I see!” Yan Ge envisioned the scenario where the army would become a force to be reckoned with after appearing and couldn’t help but feel excited. “Since the Zhantian Vine has come out of seclusion, its sap can be used as needed. Just leave it with a drop, and it will continue to produce sap. Moreover, as it has been nourished by Foundation Building Pill, its sap is far more potent than ordinary vines of its kind.”

Jiang Gan and the others couldn’t hear their conversation, but judging by their expressions, they could tell Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge were communicating via sound transmission. They remained silent in respect.

“However, with the existence of Meng Xiaohun, the security measures here are not sufficient,” Yan Ge really didn’t want to mention Huangfu Yuhu’s name, so he just referred to him directly as Meng Xiaohun. “Furthermore, in case any civilians accidentally stumble upon this base and discover its existence, it could be troublesome if news spread. We should set up formations here. Additionally, the spiritual energy concentration here is quite good, so in the future, we can arrange cultivators to cultivate here.”

Huangfu Yuchen was puzzled, “Didn’t you say there’s no formula for the Foundation Establishment Pill?” And he knew how many Foundation Establishment Pills Yan Ge had. They weren’t enough.

Yan Ge winced at the thought of all those zeros needed for the Foundation Establishment Pill formula, and he sighed wryly, “I’ll think of a solution.”

“Otherwise, we’ll have to get the money from the royal treasury! Hmph!”

Huangfu Yuchen furrowed his brows, but knowing that Yan Ge wouldn’t do anything uncertain, he didn’t say much, only advised, “Whatever you plan

to do, make sure not to harm yourself. okay?”

“Yes, let’s first deal with the formation.” Yan Ge glanced around, “Let’s assess the terrain here.”

The two didn’t let others follow them, and after circling around the wall, they had a clear idea.

“It would be best to set up a hidden formation, completely concealing this basin. Outsiders will see the area shrouded in mist, and even if they unintentionally enter the fog, they’ll unintentionally walk out again.” Yan Ge suggested.

“That’s feasible.” Huangfu Yuchen thought for a moment and nodded. The more cards they had up their sleeves, the better their chances in the future clash with Meng Xiaohun.

After returning to the palace, the two consulted Yan Jin about this matter. Yan Jin was a system, which was roughly equivalent to the internet. He was much more knowledgeable than them, and believed that a hidden formation would be the most practical.

The materials used for the formation were spirit stones, which were only available for purchase in the system store. It cost Yan Ge a substantial sum, but it was worth it. Once he and Huangfu Yuchen set up the hidden formation according to the formation diagram, a vast fog suddenly appeared in the entire basin, covering up everything that was visible to the eye

After dealing with the formation, Yan Ge mustered the courage to check the price of the Foundation Establishment Pill formula. Seeing all those zeros, he couldn’t help but count like Yan Jin, “One, two, three… One hundred million taels of silver! This is outrageous!”

“What’s wrong?” Huangfu Yuchen, who was lounging on a soft couch while sipping tea and reading analysis reports, nearly choked on his tea due to Yan Ge’s sudden outburst.

Yan Ge’s eyes shifted. He hadn’t forgotten about his side mission to complete the development of the Great Han Kingdom and make it a powerful nation. The reward was 1 million gold! Gold, not silver. He could consider this an advance payment; perhaps it was better to buy the Foundation Establishment Pill formula now. He would pay half, and Huangfu Yuchen would cover the rest.

After thinking of this, the pain eased. He walked up to Huangfu Yuchen and leaned against him, saying, “Give me fifty million silver.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s expression didn’t change at all. He casually embraced Yan Ge and replied, “Alright, baby. But let me first finish reading this memorial.”

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After receiving the fifty million taels of silver, Yan Ge took out another fifty million and bought the Foundation Building Pill recipe. Various spiritual materials required for refining the Foundation Building Pills were also purchased from the system's store, but they were relatively small expenses compared to the pill recipe. Once all the necessary materials were gathered, Yan Ge called Yan Jin, "Little Jin, are you ready?"

Yan Jin appeared immediately, "I'm ready."

In the next moment, he transformed into a white light and disappeared from Yan Ge's sight. The light screen in front of Yan Ge kept changing, and under Yan Jin's manipulation, a panel with blank boxes was filled in with the names and illustrations of various spiritual materials. Following that, an "synthesize" option jumped to the forefront and was activated by an invisible hand, mixing all the spirit materials together.

The light screen continued to flicker, leaving Yan Ge feeling dizzy. He decided not to continue watching and asked Yan Jin, "How long will it take?"

In his heart, he chuckled dryly, 'As expected of the system, it can refine the pills with just the pill recipe and spirit materials."

Yan Jin replied, "It will take one hour. The materials prepared this time can produce approximately 1000 pills in one batch. We can synthesize multiple times to meet the required quantity."

"Alright, I'll leave it to you. Deduct whatever amount of silver you need," Yan Ge had discussed with Huangfu Yuchen and they decided to select ten thousand elite soldiers for cultivation. As long as these elite soldiers had

high enough cultivation levels, they would play a decisive role in battles. Managing a large number of people would be troublesome for the young Crown Prince in the future.

Yan Ge handled the Foundation Building Pill matter, while Huangfu Yuchen focused on selecting the elite soldiers. They were to be selected from all over the kingdom, taking into account not only their physical qualities but also their character. Even though Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had sufficient cultivation levels to control them easily, having soldiers with good character could prevent many troubles.

A month later, nearly ten thousand carefully selected elite soldiers from all over the kingdom arrived in the capital city. Huangfu Yuchen's elite guard of 19 was also among them.

Gathered in the desolate and uninhabited mountains, everyone was curious about why the Emperor had summoned them here, but their military discipline dictated that they should ask as few questions as possible. Therefore, all soldiers stood tall with unwavering discipline, gazing straight ahead, not allowing their eyes to wander, as if competing to see who could maintain their position the longest.

When Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge arrived, they saw this scene and nodded in satisfaction.

"His Majesty has arrived! Huang Guiqing has arrived!"

"Long live Your Majesty! Long live Huang Guiqing!" echoed the shouts.

Huangfu Yuchen waved, "No need for formalities."

The size of the crowd was enormous, yet they could hear the Emperor's voice clearly, even though he stood at the forefront of the formation. This demonstrated the Emperor's profound inner strength. People always admired and respected strong individuals, especially those skilled in martial arts. Huangfu Yuchen's display had already impressed all the soldiers.

All the soldiers shouted at the highest volume, "Thank you, your Majesty!"

Huangfu Yuchen said in a calm tone, “Take a seat.”

The soldiers were puzzled but didn’t hesitate to sit on the ground.

Only Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, Gao Feng, Gao Yun, Jun Xiang, Lu Fei, and Deng Mande remained standing.

Huangfu Yuchen drew his spiritual sword and aimed it at a small mountain behind him, then swung it.

A bright white light flashed before everyone’s eyes, streaking like lightning towards the small mountain. After a short while, a deafening roar erupted from the ground. The soldiers were in dumbfounded, rubbing their eyes in disbelief. The mountain had been split in two, with a clear trench visible when viewed against the morning light. The two sides of the mountain were now several feet apart. Wouldn’t the gap be even wider when they approached?

The soldiers were in a daze for a long time before they knelt down and proclaimed, “Long live the Emperor!”

Huangfu Yuchen waved his hand and said, “The power I just used was not inner energy but a kind of hidden force, the power of true qi.”

He signaled to Gao Feng.

Gao Feng loudly declared, “The power of true qi comes from the spiritual energy of heaven and earth—if cultivated to the highest level, it can reshape the world.”

After giving the crowd some time to digest Gao Feng’s words, Huangfu Yuchen began, “You all are the elites among elites. I’ve gathered you here to forge you into an elite army. In case of foreign invasions, you will defend our nation and protect our homes.”

The soldiers hadn’t expected such a great opportunity and couldn’t help but feel excited. Their hearts raced, their eyes reddened, and they all rose and

knelt down, saying, “We are willing to serve the emperor, devoting ourselves fully, and we won’t hesitate to give our lives!”

Huangfu Yuchen continued, “Since you’ve all agreed, I’ll impart cultivation techniques to you. However, along with that comes a restriction. If you have no rebellious intentions, the restriction will automatically fade after a hundred years. But if you harbor treasonous thoughts, it will self-destruct, causing your demise. You can still withdraw now, and I’ll erase your memories; it won’t affect your future lives in any way.”

Once again, the soldiers unanimously declared their determination, with not a single person withdrawing. Who wouldn’t desire immense power? Even with the restriction inside them, as long as they didn’t betray the emperor or the nation, it was as good as non-existent. To exchange a restriction for the potential to become powerful, who wouldn’t be willing? They might even wake up from a dream with a smile.

“Very well,” Huangfu Yuchen said with a satisfied smile. “Xiao Ge.”

Together, Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge projected their spiritual consciousness, dividing it into dozens of strands and transmitting the first two layers of the Heavenly Demon-Annihilation Technique into the minds of the ten thousand soldiers.

The soldiers felt that their minds were suddenly enriched with profound knowledge.

“Gao Feng, Gao Yun, Jun Xiang, Lü Fei.”

The four men stepped forward, “Yes, Your Majesty!”

“Lead them to the base to cultivate their foundational and explain the rules they need to follow.”

“Yes!”

With this major task completed, both Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen felt a sense of relief. Up to this point, everything had been set on the right track.

Three years later, on Mingxia Mountain, a flock of birds suddenly burst out from the forest, flapping their wings to flee in all directions. Immediately after, two figures in white robes appeared on a tree branch. Surprisingly, they balanced on branches as thin as chopsticks, as if standing on solid ground.

These two individuals were naturally Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

“Late Nascent Soul stage. Haha!” Yan Ge laughed heartily. “Next time we cultivate, we can reach the Tribulation stage. By then, we can break through the fabric of time and attempt to return to my previous world!”

The “Fengyun Immortal Records” had shown them great favor. Since reaching the Nascent Soul stage, Yan Ge had an infant Nascent Soul seated in his dantian. Even when they had no time for cultivation, the infant Nascent Soul would continue practicing day and night, which benefites their physical bodies and increased their cultivation. During deep seclusion, the role of the infant nascent soul became even more pronounced, tirelessly aiding in the absorption of spiritual energy from heaven and earth. Could the rate of cultivation be anything but fast?

In his previous world, his biological parents were still alive. Given the chance, he certainly wanted to see them again. Even if his parents didn’t see him anything better than a stranger.

Huangfu Yuchen curled his lips. “Not only that, when the time comes, we can explore more dimensions. However, the higher our cultivation, baby, the greater the difficulty and time required for the next upgrade. Based on this trend, the next upgrade will probably take at least a year.”

“It doesn’t natter.” Yan Ge said nonchalantly, “We’ll reach the Tribulation stage sooner or later. I’m not in a hurry.” His current life was blissful and fulfilling, a perfect blend of love and career. So his attitude was quite positive.

After spending time with an optimistic person like Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen’s mindset had also became more serene. He smiled at Yan Ge’s words, hugging him tightly before touching the ground.

“Master,” Yan Jin called Yan Ge secretly.

“Little Jing, what’s the matter?”

Yan Jing said, “Master, your side mission has been completed. Check what rewards are in the golden chest.”

“Oh, right.” Yan Ge realized.

This time, the seclusion had been quite lengthy, so the system likely sent a notification. However, he didn’t hear it while in seclusion. On opening the system panel, he saw that the gold and silver quantities in his inventory had increased. Moreover, a golden chest had appeared.

He promptly opened the golden chest.

–“Ding! Congratulations, you’ve obtained 10,000 low-grade spirit stones, 10,000 middle-grade spirit stones, 10,000 high-grade spirit stones, and 10,000 top-grade spirit stones.”

Spirit stones! These were valuable resources for formations and cultivation! The system was truly like a caring mother. Yan Ge’s face curved into a delighted smile.

Huangfu Yuchen leaned over to give him an affectionate kiss on the corner of his mouth.

“Yuchen, we’re rich!” Yan Ge hugged him and returned the favor with a kiss.

After a long time without indulging in their favorite activity, Huangfu Yuchen’s self-control waned. He pressed Yan Ge against a tree and kissed him passionately, his heart surging with excitement. In one swift movement, he carried Yan Ge and disappeared into their cultivation chamber.

When the two reappeared, nearly an hour had passed. In the span of a single breath, they had returned to the palace.

After tidying up, Huangfu Yuchen went to the imperial study. He wanted to see if the court had remained calm during this recent period.

Yan Ge called Yan Jin back to the Tenglong Palace, and meticulously inquired about the matter concerning the spirit stones.

“One top-grade spirit stone is equivalent to 100 high-grade spirit stones, 1 high-grade spirit stone equals 100 middle-grade spirit stones, and 1 middle-grade spirit stone equals 100 low-grade spirit stones, Master, you’ve struck it rich.” Yan Jin was also excited. However, now at the age of fourteen, he had lost interest in acting cute, and he had become quite composed.

Yan Ge was also excited. With these spirit stones, setting up a Gathering Formation during cultivation would undoubtedly result in rapid progress.

“Reporting to Huang Guiqing, the Crown Prince requests an audience.”

Yan Ge had long treated the young Crown Prince as his own son. He hastily said, “Please, let him in.”

After a few moments, a handsome youth with a regal demeanor entered. The youth’s eyes were serene, and he exuded a calm and majestic aura. This was none other than Huangfu Yunxi.

Upon seeing Yan Ge, Huangfu Yunxi smiled faintly and took a few steps closer. “Yunxi greets Second Master.”

“Come, take a seat.” Yan Ge playfully ruffled his hair.

The Crown Prince appeared somewhat embarrassed but he was smiling, which showed he liked Yan Ge’s intimate gestures. “I heard that you and Father both came out of seclusion today, so I came to see you.”

As expected of father and son. Whether it was personality or the way they handled things, Huangfu Yunxi now resembled Huangfu Yuchen by about seventy or eighty percent. Due to his maturity and understanding of matters, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had told him about their cultivation journey

about a year ago. Additionally, Huangfu Yunxi was also cultivating now, practicing the “Heavenly Demon-Annihilation Technique.”

However, with Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen personally guiding him, his progress was faster than that of the ten thousand elite soldiers. He had already reached the early golden core stage.

“Yes, your father went to the imperial study. How have things been during this period?” Yan Ge inquired with concern.

Huangfu Yunxi reported, “Thank you for your concern, Second Master. I’m doing well. Ever since Father went into seclusion, I’ve been presiding over the court. A few ministers have assisted, and everything has been smooth.”

The three chatted for a while until Huangfu Yuchen returned. Upon seeing Huangfu Yunxi, he generously praised his recent performance. Although the praise was delivered expressionlessly, Huangfu Yunxi was genuinely pleased. Getting acknowledgment from his father was more important than anything else.

“Xiao Ge, let’s have a meal first, then go to the base.” Huangfu Yuchen said.

“Alright,” Yan Ge nodded. “Yunxi, you can come along as well.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded and looked at Huangfu Yunxi. “Yes, regardless of the circumstances, listening and observing more will be beneficial for you.”

A resolute light flickered in Huangfu Yunxi’s eyes. “I understand, Father.” He had a premonition that both his father and Second Master were soon stepping back and entrusting the entire nation to him. Therefore, he needed to work even harder.

Yan Jin also went along. He had come out of seclusion just a few days earlier than Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. Moreover, now that Huangfu Yunxi could stand on his own, there were many occasions where he didn’t need his company so he was feeling somewhat bored.

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The four of them left the city without bringing any guards and rode their horses directly. While Yan Jin and the Crown Prince chatted and laughed behind them, Yan Ge noticed that Huangfu Yuchen seemed preoccupied.

“What happened? Everything seemed fine in the palace just now,” Yan Ge inquired.

“Two months ago, the Mai Kingdom annexed the Mei Kingdom, making it its vassal state,” Huangfu Yuchen explained.

Yan Ge was startled and asked, “So, you are worried that the Mai Kingdom might target Great Han next?”

Great Han has three neighboring kingdoms: Mei Kingdom to the north, Mai Kingdom to the west, and Youji Kingdom to the southwest. The eastern and southern borders were bordered by the sea. Among these four kingdoms, Mai and Great Han had the strongest forces, followed by Youji Kingdom, and Mei Kingdom was the weakest. That’s why Huangfu Yuchen has always considered Mai Kingdom as a threat.

Huangfu Yunxi and Yan Jin stopped their conversation and slowed their horses, continuing to listen to them.

If Huangfu Yuchen was concerned, it must be a serious matter.

Huangfu Yuchen’s face remained calm without any signs of anxiety. He said, “If Mai Kingdom wants to expand externally, they will surely target the neighboring kingdoms first. Among Great Han, Mai, Youji, and Mei Kingdom, the Mai Kingdom is adjacent to the Mei Kingdom in the north, borders Great Han in the east, and shares a border with Youji in the south. Among these three, Mei Kingdom is the smallest and the easiest to conquer.

However, Mei Kingdom’s resources are not abundant due to its cold climate and long winters. In other words, making Mei Kingdom a vassal state would not bring any significant benefits to Mai kingdom. Territory-wise, there hasn’t been any significant troop or civilian movements between the two kingdoms. As for resources, Mei Kingdom’s production is just enough for self-sufficiency. So, it’s strange that the Mai kingdom chose to target the Mei Kingdom first.”

Huangfu Yunxi chimed in, “I have also thought about this matter and suspect their ultimate goal is to utilize Mei Kingdom’s army for free. When I heard the news of the Mei Kingdom’s defeat, I immediately sent orders to strengthen the border defenses at the western frontier. However, nothing unusual has happened in the past two months.”

“If they want manpower, wouldn’t it be more suitable to attack Youji Kingdom, which has a larger population?” Huangfu Yuchen guided his son’s thinking, “Moreover, it wouldn’t be difficult for Mai kingdom to conquer Youji Kingdom in terms of strength, and Youji Kingdom possesses far more resources than Mei.”

Huangfu Yunxi nodded, “Later, the ministers in the court also discussed this, but they couldn’t find a clear reason.”

“In that case, there must be some conspiracy behind all this,” Yan Jin said, “I think their true intention is related to our Great Han. Hu Mailong is ambitious, but there have been no movements from him these years, it is hard not to be suspicious.”

Yan Ge frowned and couldn’t help but think of Meng Xiaohun. Could this matter be related to him? He was really despicable, being so ruthless to his own half-brother. As long as Meng Xiaohun doesn’t die, he will always be a thorn in his heart.

He looked at Huangfu Yuchen. What he could think of, Yuchen must be able to think of as well.

After glancing at him, Huangfu Yuchen nodded slightly, also sharing the same guess, “I’ve already sent someone to gather information covertly.

Hopefully, we'll get some results."

Yan Ge still asked with concern, "Yuchen, I'll go back first." He could only leave a sentence before disappearing from Bai Guan's back.

"Where is Papa going?" Yan Jin wondered.

Huh, did he hold it in for too long while meditating? He seems so energetic. Huangfu Yuchen withdrew his gaze, "Let's go to the base first."

In the office of the Imperial City Amusement Park, Wen Xian was checking the accounts for the past six months when he noticed a sudden appearance of a person dressed in white. He almost dropped the teacup on the table.

He stood up, and made a gesture of "please" but couldn't help looking at Yan Ge helplessly, "Boss Yan, you will scare people to death. "

"I'm sorry, it's urgent," Yan Ge replied.

Surprisingly, Yan Ge didn't seize the chance to tease him, and Wen Xian immediately realized that something unusual was going on. His expression turned serious, and he poured a cup of tea for him before asking, "What happened?"

Yan Ge's hand touched the teacup, and the rising steam suddenly diminished.

Wen Xian's pupils shrank. 'Boss Yan's internal strength is indeed profound!'

"Manager Wen, from now on, please secretly ensure that all grain depots are replenished," Yan Ge's tone was very calm. Although the grain was cheap in the system's store, it needed to be prepared openly, or else it might raise suspicions.

Wen Xian's expression changed.

Yan Ge's gaze suddenly turned sharp, but he still had a smile on his lips, "This is a personal arrangement of mine, Manager Wen, you don't have to

worry about anything else.”

Being a shrewd person, Wen Xian could easily sense the implication or warning in Yan Ge’s words. Private relationships remained private, but when it involved grain depots, it touched national affairs. Yan Ge was warning the Wen family not to act rashly. Everything was still unclear, and if the Wen family’s actions led to economic instability or unrest among the people, it would be a big problem.

“Don’t worry, Boss Yan. I will handle it,” Wen Xian responded seriously. In fact, he had no intention of taking any rash action. They were in the capital, and even if Great Han were invaded by an enemy state, the capital would be the last place affected. Moreover, the Emperor and Boss Yan had shown their capabilities over the years, so he had confidence in them. The only thing he needed to do was to cooperate.

“Of course, I trust you.” Yan Ge’s eyes softened a bit, “If I didn’t trust you, I wouldn’t have given you this task. I have something to attend to, so I’ll leave first. I’ll invite you for tea another day.”

Before Wen Xian could react, the person in front of him disappeared into thin air. He couldn’t help touching his heart. Fortunately, he had been very frank with Yan Ge since their cooperation and was an honest person, otherwise, he wouldn’t dare to interact too much with the royal family. As long as the Wen family remained sincere, their prosperous days would only become more long-lasting.

When Yan Ge flew back, Huangfu Yuchen had just arrived outside the mountain where the base was located

He flew towards his horse with a smile on his face and was about to take a seat when Huangfu Yuchen lightly kicked Bai Guan’s belly. Yan Ge was caught off guard and fell downward. Huangfu Yuchen reached out, caught him and held him in his arms, asking with concern, “Why are you so careless?”

Yan Ge turned his head, giving him a sidelong glance. What had he done to provoke this guy again?

Ignoring Yan Ge’s gaze, Huangfu Yuchen squeezed his waist, holding him close and saying contentedly, “Don’t leave me for too long.”

Yan Ge was taken aback and then kisses his cheek, finding it somewhat amusing. Was he worried that he would run away?

Yan Jin and Huangfu Yunxi were initially behind them. When they saw this scene, they moved forward but it could be seen that they were holding in laughter.

Yan Ge swung out a palm strike, and two strands of true qi gently whipped the horses’ backsides.

Yan Jin and Huangfu Yunxi’s horses immediately galloped forward, carrying the two youths farther away.

After reaching the base, the four of them resumed their solemn demeanor.

The cultivators on the training ground saluted with awe, “Greetings, Your Majesty, Greetings Huang Guiqing. Long live Your Majesty.” Now that they had cultivated, they could tell even more clearly that Huangfu Yuchen’s and Yan Ge’s cultivation base was far higher than them.

“You may rise.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty!”

Gao Feng and Gao Yun stepped forward, “We pay our respects to Your Majesty, to His Highness the Crown Prince, to His Highness the Second Prince, and to Huang Guiqing.”

“There’s no need for formalities.”

Gao Feng and Gao Yun looked slightly excited and Yan Ge couldn’t help but wonder why. Although it had been a while since they last met, Gao Feng and Gao Yun shouldn’t be this excited. There must be something. But there were too many people around, so he didn’t ask immediately.

Ever since the cultivators settled into the base, the entire area had been divided into two sections by an array. The cultivators and the researchers were completely separated and didn't interfere with each other. With a soundproof array in place, both sides couldn't disturb each other. Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge briefly scanned the crowd. Among the cultivators, the highest level of cultivation was the Late Golden Core stage, a remarkable achievement in just three years.

"Did you record the number of cultivators at each stage?" Yan Ge asked.

Gao Feng responded, "Yes, Huang Guiqing. Your Majesties, Huang Guiqing, please coms in. I will retrieve the records immediately."

"Continue with your cultivation," Huangfu Yuchen said to the rest, then took Yan Ge's hand and walked towards the house.

Gao Feng brought the record book and respectfully handed it to Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen leaned slightly to the side, allowing Yan Ge to look at it as well.

Among the ten thousand elite soldiers, there were five at the Late Golden Core Late, eight at the Mid Golden Core Stage, and thirty-six at the early Golden Core Stage. There were a total of 124 at the Foundation Establishment stage, and the rest were at the Qi Condensation stage. It was worth mentioning that all the 19 members in the Elite Guards were at the Golden Core stage. It seemed that the spirit-boosting pills had worked wonders.

Although Gao Feng, Gao Yun, Jun Xiang, and Lu Fei were the first batch to start cultivating, their cultivation level was not the highest. Gao Feng and Gao Yun were at the mod golden core stage, while Jun Xiang and Lu Fei were at the early golden core stage. The highest cultivation level and the most stable realm were held by the captain of the elite shadow guards, Cheng Jingfeng, and the deputy captain, Du Zhengfeng.

“What happened?” Huangfu Yuchen asked Gao Feng and Gao Yun after reading the records.

Gao Feng explained, “Your Majesty, half a month ago, a soldier rushed to advance his cultivation and got demon possessed. We asked the physicians to treat him, but his condition hasn’t improved, and he’s still in a coma. If this continues, he may not have many days left.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s brows furrowed, “Does he take my words as if they were just a passing breeze? How did I tell them to proceed? Step by step, not recklessly!”

“It is because this subordinate failed in handling the matter, please punish me, Your Majesty,” Gao Feng knelt down promptly, “Fortunately, no one dared to act hastily after this incident . Except for him, no one made any mistakes.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s expression eased slightly, but his voice remained cold and stern, “While Xiao Ge can treat condition of entering demonic possession can be treated, he is not their exclusive physician! If such a situation happens again, I will not hesitate to dismiss them!”

Gao Feng bowed his head, respectfully saying, “This subordinate understands!”

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Yan Ge went to treat those affected by demonic possession while Huangfu Yuchen returned to the training ground to observe a few practice sessions, gaining a deeper understanding of the cultivators' strength. Perhaps due to the resilience of the elite shadow guards themselves, their cultivation levels were the most stable among the ten thousand troops.

"Starting today, Cheng Jingfeng will be the leader, and Du Zhengfeng will be the deputy leader. The ten thousand 'Jingxiu Guards' will be under your full command," Huangfu Yuchen said. "Those who will return to the mortal world can be summoned at any time, but remember not to reveal the identity of cultivators."

"Yes! We understand, Your Majesty," Cheng Jingfeng and Du Zhengfeng replied in unison.

Gao Feng, Gao Yun, Jun Xiang, and Lu Fei were stripped of their authority, but they remained calm. The Emperor and Huang Guiqing had mentioned before that the cultivation world respected the strong. Many cultivators had surpassed them in cultivation, and they found it difficult to manage these individuals. Losing their authority now could be seen as a fortunate turn of events.

At the entrance of the Tenglong Palace, the Minister of War was pacing anxiously. Although Prime Minister Wu stood at the side without moving, his expression was grave.

Seeing the carriage approach, the two hurriedly went up to meet it.

"We pay our respects to Your Majesty."

“What’s the matter?” Huangfu Yuchen had already seen them through the curtain with his spiritual sense.

“Your Majesty, we’ve just received an urgent report. The southwest border has gone to war!”

Gao Feng and the others exchanged astonished glances.

Yan Ge’s pupils contracted slightly, but his expression remained unchanged.

Huangfu Yuchen’s voice deepened, “Let’s go in and talk.”

“Yes.”

In the hall, Luo Wei handed the report to Deng Mande, delivering a clear and organized account, “Three days ago, General Wei Chi suddenly discovered significant movements among the garrison troops of the Youji Kingdom. He became suspicious and sent scouts to infiltrate Youji to investigate. It was confirmed that they were indeed mobilizing troops, so he immediately prepared our forces and secretly made defensive arrangements. The next day, before dawn, the Youji Kingdom’s fifty thousand troops launched a surprise attack, and the war began. At the time the report was sent out, both sides were engaged in fierce battle, and there are no further updates.”

Jiang Gan said, “Your Majesty, I find this matter rather suspicious. The King of Youji has always avoided conflict and maintained good relations with neighboring kingdoms. First, they lack the economic and military strength compared to us. Provoking us is tantamount to seeking death, and the King of Youji cannot be unaware of this.”

“Prime Minister Wu, now is not the time to find reasons,” Luo Wei said in a hurry. The Great Han Kingdom had not engaged in a war with anyone for many years, and as the Minister of War, he was anxious.

Jiang Gan glanced at him but didn’t say anything, then looked back at the Emperor.

Yan Ge remained silent; military affairs were not his area of expertise, so he listened quietly.

Huangfu Yuchen tapped his fingers silently on the table. His brows furrowed as he pondered, “This matter is indeed strange. Is our army’s food and supplies sufficient?”

Luo Wei replied, “We can sustain for half a month.”

“If they want war, we’ll give them war,” Huangfu Yuchen said, “Issue the decree to immediately gather supplies from the nearest Chanzhou and Mianzhou and be ready to send them to the border at any time. Furthermore, dispatch someone to investigate the reason why Youji Kingdom started a war. Once there’s any further information, report back immediately!”

“Yes!”

After Jiang Gan and Luo Wei left, Yan Ge approached Huangfu Yuchen, “Yuchen, I’ll go to the southwest.”

Huangfu Yuchen looked at his bright eyes and expectant expression, and sighed softly, “Alright.”

He couldn’t refuse; both he and Xiao Ge had just advanced to a new realm and needed to consolidate their cultivation. Besides, the situations with the Mei Kingdom’s defeat and Youji Kingdom’s war were quite suspicious. He had a faint sense of conspiracy and needed to stay in the capital to oversee the overall situation. This time, even if he didn’t want to, he had to temporarily separate from his beloved.

Yan Ge didn’t expect Huangfu Yuchen to agree so readily. He didn’t care about Yunxi and Yan Yin being there and hugged his lover’s neck, kissing him on the lips, “I’ll be careful.”

“Hmm,” Huangfu Yuchen took a jade slip from his storage ring and handed it to Yan Ge, “In case you encounter any trouble you can’t deal with,

contact me.” He infused his spiritual sense into the jade slip, allowing him to sense Yan Ge’s distress when he crushes it.

“I understand. I’ll leave now. I’ll be bringing Gao Feng and the others along, so don’t worry. Little Jin, let’s go.”

“Father…” Huangfu Yunxi watched Yan Ge and Yan Jin’s figures disappear at the door and knelt down, “Reporting to Father Emperor, this son also wants to go along.”

Huangfu Yuchen looked at him approvingly, “Even if you didn’t ask, I intended for you to go.”

Yunxi was overjoyed, “Thank you, Father Emperor!”

Huangfu Yuchen didn’t immediately ask him to rise, “But remember, I’m letting you go, not for you to show off or act recklessly.”

“This son understands, Father Emperor. You want me to personally experience everything on the battlefield: the cruelty, the glory, the good, and the evil. Only by doing so will I truly comprehend my current position and future responsibilities.”

“Good,” Huangfu Yuchen said with satisfaction, walking up to his son and lightly patting his head. “You truly are my son. Go.”

Having received his father’s approval and affectionate gesture, Huangfu Yunxi’s voice became even more resolute, “Yes!”

After Huangfu Yunxi left, Huangfu Yuchen sat quietly behind his desk for a moment before communicating with Cheng Jingfeng at the base, “The southwest border has gone to war. Inform all those currently wandering outside the capital to avoid the southwest region. The Jingxiu Guards are our secret weapon and should not be revealed unless absolutely necessary.”

“This subordinate understands, Your Majesty. Please rest assured.”

Huangfu Yunxi returned to the Crown Prince’s Palace and instructed his attendants to pack his belongings. When the Empress heard the news, she

hurriedly rode in a phoenix carriage to see him, “My child, I heard you plan to accompany Huang Guiqing to the southwest border?”

“Yes, Mother,” Huangfu Yunxi didn’t even turn around and continued instructing the maids, “We don’t need to bring too many clothes, just two or three sets.”

“Xi’Er!” The Empress’ expression turned slightly grave, “I won’t allow you to go. You are the Crown Prince; how can you put yourself in danger?”

“Mother, Father has already agreed,” Huangfu Yunxi said helplessly, supporting the Empress to sit down, “Mother, this is a rare opportunity. Second Master’s martial skills are exceptional, and he will protect me. Please rest assured.”

The Empress frowned, “How could your father agree…?” Huangfu Yunxi was not only her beloved son but also the only heir to the throne. She couldn’t believe that the Emperor would allow Huangfu Yunxi to take such a risk. If anything happened to him, there would be chaos in the empire since Huangfu Yuchen had no other heirs.

“Mother,” Huangfu Yunxi held her hand, looking straight into her eyes, “You know in your heart that I must do this. Just like what Father could do back then, I can do it too.”

The Empress looked at him, feeling somewhat lost. How could she not know about the Emperor’s past military campaigns? The Crown Prince was becoming more and more like the Emperor. Very well, since he was the Crown Prince, he had to grow up.

With this in mind, a relieved expression appeared on her face, and she kindly asked, “How is the packing coming along? Can Mother help you?”

Huangfu Yunxi smiled at her and looked back, “It’s almost done. I don’t need to bring much.”

Not long after, a small team galloped out of the imperial palace. This was Yan Ge’s group. They were mainly going to assess the situation, so there

were only seven of them: Yan Ge, Yan Jin, Huangfu Yunxi, Gao Feng, Gao Yun, Lu Fei, and Jun Xiang. They were all in disguise, and a smaller group was advantageous.

Outside the capital and while riding at full speed, Yan Ge instructed Gao Feng and the others, “Remember, from now on, your mission is to protect the Young Master. No matter what happens, there should be at least one person by his side.”

“Yes!”

Yan Ge then looked at Huangfu Yunxi, “Yunxi, remember, this time is just for you to observe. Don’t try to be too brave or take the lead.”

“Yes, Second Master.”

Still feeling worried, Yan Ge took off the Zhantian Vine from his head and instructed it: “From now on, your mission is to protect Yunxi.”

The Zhantian vine nodded its “head” and floated over to Huangfu YunXi, landing on his head.

“Thank you, Second Master,” Huangfu Yunxi touched the Zhan Tian Vine, and felt his anxious heart settle down.

They were all cultivators (though Yan Jin was not a cultivator, he still cultivated). Their physical strength and endurance were extraordinary. Along the way, they rarely stopped except to let the horses rest. After a few days, they arrived at the southwest border.

About three or four miles away, they could already see the distant black military tents. That was the encampment of the Great Han Kingdom’s garrison troops.

“Young Master, we’re almost there,” Gao Yun said.

Yan Ge reined in his horse, looking at Huangfu Yunxi, “Yunxi, lead them over.”

He intended to test Huangfu Yunxi and give him the chance to take charge.

Yunxi understood Yan Ge's intentions and nodded. "Second Master, aren't you coming with us?"

Yan Ge smiled faintly, "I have other plans. You don't need to worry about me. Little Jin, you go with Yunxi too."

With the addition of Zhantian Vine and Yan Jin, Yunxi's safety was pretty much ensured.

"Yes."

Yan Ge watched them depart and smoothly entered the base. He then turned his horse around and galloped in another direction.

On entering a forest, Yan Ge stopped his horse and jumped onto the tallest tree to look into the distance.

About two to three miles away from the Great Han Kingdom's garrison was Youji Kingdom's camp. Both sides were on flat ground, allowing them to observe each other's movements clearly.

It was mealtime, and the enemy's soldiers and horses were outside. Yan Ge made a rough estimation; there were about forty thousand troops from Youji Kingdom and around thirty thousand from the Great Han Kingdom.

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Yan Ge adjusted himself to a comfortable position on a tree branch and waited for the battle to begin. He took out a rolled pancake from the system backpack and ate it, then ate by xiaolongbao and steamed dumplings, not feeling bored at all.

After about a cup of tea, Youji Kingdom's army moved, charging silently towards the Great Han Kingdom's garrison like mute dogs and holding their weapons.

Yan Ge's brows furrowed at the sight.

On the Great Han Kingdom's side, the sentries who were already closely monitoring the enemy's movements beat the war drum, shouting, "Enemy attack!"

Soldiers grabbed their weapons, leaving their unfinished lunch, and followed the generals' commands to meet the enemy head-on.

Only then did Youji Kingdom sound their war drums, beating louder and faster. Their soldiers fearlessly charged forward without the fear of death.

"Attack!"

The drumbeats were intense, and the battle cries echoed. The two forces quickly clashed, swinging their swords and spears, engaging in a chaotic melee.

Yan Ge's brows furrowed even tighter. Even without understanding military tactics, he could tell that Youji Kingdom's approach was reckless and lacked any strategy. Their unorganized attack was like a desperate move, bringing no advantage to either side. Moreover, since the soldiers of the

Great Han Kingdom began training in a new way, their physical strength, endurance, and agility were far superior to those of Youji Kingdom. Even if Youji Kingdom managed to kill eight hundred enemies, they would lose a thousand troops in the process. Did the Youji Kingdom's generals take the wrong medicine?

"Boom, boom!" The sound of Great Han Kingdom's gas grenades rang out.

The melee continued for about half an hour, during which Yan Ge observed closely. Youji Kingdom still hadn't changed its strategy, so the Great Han Kingdom was unable to break away.

At this moment, Youji Kingdom's war drums suddenly stopped, then after a short while, they rang three times in succession. Nearly ten thousand soldiers and horses surged out from the rear of Youji Kingdom's camp, rushing towards the battlefield.

"Attack!"

The Great Han Kingdom also sent out ten thousand troops, dividing them into four squads to encircle Youji Kingdom's army from both sides.

From afar, Yan Ge saw Jun Xiang and Lu Fei courageously fighting in the enemy ranks. Gao Feng and Gao Yun followed closely behind Yunxi, who was fighting alongside Wei Hao.

After about an incense stick's worth of time, Jun Xiang and Lu Fei returned to Yunxi's side. Gao Feng and Gao Yun flew up one after the other, displaying their bravery as their sword energy swept through the enemy ranks like they were cutting wheat.

Nearly an hour later, Youji Kingdom finally ordered a retreat.

Wei Hao seemed to be pondering something and did not order a pursuit. Instead, he commanded soldiers to clean up the battlefield, recovering all the swords, arrows, and other items. They also collected the money and belongings from the fallen Youji Kingdom soldiers.

Yan Ge watched from afar and estimated that Youji Kingdom wouldn't attack again anytime soon before he rode his horse back to the Great Han Kingdom's main camp.

"Stop! Who goes there?"

Yan Ge didn't dismount and pulled out a golden token with the character "Huang" clearly visible. "My name is Qin, I am a noble from the capital here to meet General Wei Chi. Take me to him immediately."

"Oh, it's Lord Qin. Please come this way!"

Yan Ge dismounted and followed the soldier to the commander's tent.

Inside the tent, Wei Chi was writing a military report to promptly inform the emperor of the latest situation.

"General, Lord Qin from the capital requests an audience."

"Lord Qin?" Wei Chi immediately thought of Yan Ge. "Please let him in."

"General, are you alright? I came here of my accord," Yan Ge greeted with a smile as he entered the tent.

Wei Chi dismissed the others and bowed to Yan Ge.

"I've seen Huang Guiqing. Thanks to His Majesty and Huang Guiqing, everything is well."

Seeing the paper and pen on the desk, Yan Ge asked, "General, are you writing a battlefield report?"

"Indeed."

"Don't rush with the report for now. Please, take a seat," Yan Ge waited for Wei Chi to sit before he took his seat. "Just now, I observed the battle between the two armies from the shadows and noticed some strange aspects. Do you feel the same, General?"

Wei Chi nodded, his brows slightly furrowing. “Indeed, it’s strange. I’ve been leading troops in battles for many years, and this is the first time I’ve encountered such a situation.”

Yan Ge wasn’t in a hurry to ask for Wei Chi’s opinion. “How many reports have you sent up to now? Are there any copies?”

“This is the sixth report, and all the previous ones have copies. Please wait, Huang Guiqing,” Wei Chi said as he opened a drawer and handed Yan Ge the previous reports.

These were made to facilitate a focused analysis of intelligence and aid in the formulation of the next battle plan.

After carefully reviewing each report, Yan Ge raised his head. “Up until now, Youji Kingdom has lost nearly ten thousand troops, and in the six battles, they haven’t gained any advantage, and judging from their disposition, they still have no intention of retreating. General, when you said something was ‘strange,’ what did you mean?”

Wei Chi pressed his brows, days of fighting had affected his spirit. “Based on various signs, the Youji Kingdom’s commanders seem indifferent to the life and death of their soldiers. Their conduct is not in line with the manner of General Qin Ke, and the Youji Kingdom’s forces are insufficient to support such a forceful attack. I once sent someone to infiltrate their camp for intelligence, but to no avail. While our losses are still smaller than theirs, if this continues, we might have to redeploy troops from other areas. However, doing so means guarding against their feints and diversions.”

“Your thoughts align with mine. Their offensive is devoid of strategy. Their actions show no strategic thinking; it’s like they are urgently trying to achieve something other than conquering the Great Han Kingdom,” Yan Ge pondered while touching his face. “In that case, divide the content of this report into two parts: the first part objectively describes the situation, and the second part includes our speculations. Aso, report my safety.”

“Yes.”

Wei Chi continued writing the report, and Yan Ge thought for a moment. “If they don’t retreat by nightfall, I will sneak into their camp and investigate.”

Wei Chi was surprised. “Huang Guiqing plans to go there by himself?”

Yan Ge smiled. “Rest assured, since the emperor agreed to let me come alone, he has confidence in me.”

Wei Chi had no choice but to hold back his words. He finished the report, and called a soldier. “Deliver this report to the capital, urgently.”

“Yes!”

Yan Ge took out a bottle of pills from his sleeve. “General, you don’t look too good. Take this pill daily for half a month, and it will help you recover from any hidden injuries and strengthen your body.”

Wei Chi gratefully accepted the pill. “Thank you, Huang Guiqing!”

“No need to be polite.” Yan Ge waved and smiled. “The southwestern border relies on General Wei Chi.”

Yan Ge waited in the camp until it was dark. Youji Kingdom didn’t launch another attack nor withdraw their troops. When it was getting dark, Yan Ge informed Wei Chi not to worry even if he returned late, then he disappeared into the night.

With his high-level cultivation, it was easy to enter the enemy’s camp. He entered silently and headed directly to the tent with the most guards.

Inside the tent, General Qin Ke and Deputy General Shi sat expressionless. Neither of them spoke and they seemed lost in thought.

*Yan Ge met General Qin Ke and his deputy when they entered Youji Kingdom to steal gold.

This was indeed strange. Yan Ge had some understanding of these two, and it wasn’t their style to be lost in thought like this. He waited for a long time, but they still didn’t say a word. To avoid arousing suspicion, he quietly left,

feeling somewhat frustrated. Suddenly, he thought of the report, and had a flash of inspiration.

The other party would definitely send a battle report to the palace. It he intercepted the report….

He didn’t return to Great Han’s camp but turned and found a place to hide behind the Youji Kingdom’s camp.

As dawn broke, the Youji Kingdom launched another attack.

Yan Ge continued to watch from the shadows, occasionally using his spiritual sense to flip over a few Youji Kingdom’s soldiers, making it easier for Great Han’s soldiers to kill them.

Surprisingly, this attack lasted only half an hour before General Qin Ke ordered a retreat.

Yan Ge was delighted; the concealment offered by the shadows was advantageous. He waited for the soldier carrying the report back to the palace.

To his surprise, he waited for half an hour and didn’t even catch a glimpse of the person. He waited patiently for about an incense stick, but the soldier bearing the report still hadn’t appeared on this vital route.

Yan Ge’s expression gradually grew solemn as he rose from behind the thicket. The battle report recorded urgent military information, allowing the emperor and the court to keep track of the battlefield situation, including the battle results, resource transportation, and even requests for reinforcements. Normally, a report would be sent immediately after a battle ended. However, the Youji Kingdom’s generals didn’t do so, indicating that there must be a significant problem.

Thinking of this, he didn’t delay any further. He immediately used an invisibility technique and flew openly back to the Great Han Kingdom’s camp to inform Wei Chi. Wei Chi was an experienced general and likely had more insight than him.

Sure enough, when Wei Chi heard the news, his expression changed drastically as he paced back and forth in the tent. “Could it be that General Qin Ke started the war without authorization? That’s impossible; it’s a grave crime punishable by the extermination of nine clans. He wouldn’t do that. Moreover, he must have mobilized a considerable number of troops from elsewhere. It’s impossible not to alert his king. What on earth is going on?”

“Indeed…” Several deputy generals present were also puzzled.

“General, regardless of the situation, we must report this to His Majesty,” A staff officer He said. “The emperor has more information in hand, and by combining everything, we might find the answer.”

“Yes,” one deputy general added, “Their continuous fierce attacks have clearly affected the morale of Youji Kingdom’s soldiers, yet General Qin Ke persists relentlessly. It is truly puzzling.”

Yan Ge devised a plan in his mind. As the main general, Wei Chi was several years away from retirement, so if he intervened hastily, it could affect Wei Chi’s reputation within the military.

However, a pre-battle mobilization was still feasible.

“General, I need you to gather the soldiers. I have a few words to say,” Yan Ge said.

Wei Chi’s eyes flickered, “Understood.”

“I’ll go change into the royal attire first.”

By the time Yan Ge appeared in his imperial clothing, the soldiers were already assembled.

He slowly walked up to the commanding platform.

“Huang Guiqing has arrived—”

“We pay our respects to Huang Guiqing—”

“No need for formalities.”

“Thank you, Huang Guiqing.”

Yan Ge swept his gaze below and smiled slightly, then his clear voice resounded in the training ground, “The Emperor has learned about the unrest in the southwest border. He is angered by the audacious actions of Youji Kingdom and is concerned about the soldiers guarding the border. Therefore, he specially dispatched me to comfort and convey his decree to all of you. In this battle against Youji Kingdom, promotions and rewards will be granted based on merit. Killing an ordinary soldier will be rewarded with 5 copper coins, killing a sergeant with 1 silver tael, killing a company commander with 2 silver taels, and killing a hundred-man commander with 3 silver taels… For killing more than ten enemies, an extra 1 silver tael will be given, and for exceeding twenty, an additional 2 silver taels will be granted. The specific details will be posted by the general in the public notice. In short, those with merit will be heavily rewarded. I hope that you, my fellow generals and soldiers, will not disappoint me, nor will you disappoint the Emperor.”

The tens of thousands of soldiers were moved and shouted in unison, “Long live the Emperor, long live!”

Seeing the high morale of the soldiers, Wei Chi was touched and stepped onto the platform, “Initiate the attack immediately!”

Yan Ge praised him with a glance; he truly deserved to be an experienced general.

The intense sound of war drums resounded, and the soldiers of Great Han charged fiercely towards the camp of Youji Kingdom.

“Charge——”

“Kill——”

Yan Ge said, “Someone, bring me pen and paper.”

“Yes.”

As Yan Ge observed the distant movements, he improved the reward system in his mind and dictated, “Write this down. Killing an ordinary soldier will be rewarded with 5 copper coins; killing a sergeant with 1 silver tael, killing a company commander with 2 silver taels…”

The clerk’s pen flew quickly on the paper.

Yunxi walked to Yan Ge’s side and looked at the contents on the paper thoughtfully.

Gao Feng and the others shouted together, “Young Master, it’s time.”

Yan Ge understood what they were talking about and nodded, “Go.”

“Yes.”

Gao Feng and the others rushed into the battlefield excitedly.

Inside the main general’s tent of Youji Kingdom, General Qin Ke heard the shouts and stood up abruptly, “What’s going on?”

The curtain was suddenly lifted, and a soldier rushed in, looking flustered, “General, it’s bad. Great Han has launched a full-scale attack!”

General Qin Ke’s face turned cold, and he slapped the soldier with a loud “smack.”

The soldier’s face instantly showed a clear palm mark.

“Why panic! Worthless trash! Can our sixty thousand troops not defeat their fifty thousand?”

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Qin Ke's face turned gloomy as he walked out of the tent and ascended the commanding platform, looking into the distance.

Soldiers of Youji Kingdom clad in black and soldiers of Great Han Kingdom in camouflage were engaged in a fierce battle, like two different colors of paint poured into flowing water, they blended and wriggled together. Great Han's soldiers charged fearlessly, wielding their big swords with a death wish, slaying one enemy with each swing. The Youji soldiers were stunned by their momentum, their faces showing fear as they dodged and retreated. Occasionally, a black sphere would be thrown into the Youji ranks, causing an explosive "bang" and killing a number of soldiers. The battlefield echoed with cries of agony, and the thick scent of blood mixed with the cold wind made people nauseous.

"Charge——Kill——"

Qin Ke was startled and asked, "What's going on? Why are Great Han's soldiers so excited?"

No one answered and the Youji troops retreated step by step.

Deputy General Shi had a pale complexion, looking at Qin Ke with eyes filled with anger and sorrow. He spoke slowly and heavily, "This war was hastily prepared, and we are simply no match for Great Han Kingdom. General, do you still want to continue sending soldiers to their deaths? They are our own men…"

Qin Ke opened his mouth but couldn't say a word.

"General!" Vice General Shi looked at him in disbelief.

Qin Ke took a silent breath, his eyes filled with confusion, “The king’s command is hard to refuse…”

“There is also the saying, ‘The general will not always obey the king’s command!’” Deputy General Shi roared, “I’ll issue the order to retreat; after all, I’m just a lonely individual!”

With that, he rushed down from the commanding platform.

Qin Ke stood still for a moment, then turned to the soldiers in front of the war drums and yelled, “Retreat! I command you to retreat!”

“Boom! Boom! Boom!” The war drums were heavily beaten three times.

Wei Chi raised an eyebrow in puzzlement and waved a small flag.

The drummer had been paying attention to the general’s movements and, seeing the signal, first beat the drum heavily once, and then twice. The Great Han soldiers stopped in their tracks, still cautious but with happy smiles on their faces, watching the Youji soldiers flee like mice encountering a cat, reveling in their joy.

Wei Chi, Yan Ge, and a few others rode their horses forward and looked at the opposite side from a distance.

The Youji soldiers regrouped after retreating to their camp and stood still.

Qin Ke and Deputy General Shi came over with six soldiers on horseback.

Wei Chi said to Yan Ge, “Huang Guiqing, please allow me to meet the general for a moment.”

“General, please.” Yan Ge nodded.

Wei Chi also brought an equal number of soldiers and rode over.

When they were about forty to fifty steps apart, they stopped.

Qin Ke wore a look of humiliation and managed to adjust his expression with difficulty. He greeted Wei Chi with a polite tone, “General Wei Chi.”

“General Qin,” Wei Chi held the reins in his left hand and casually rested his right hand on his thigh, smiling lightly.

As expected of a seasoned general, Qin Ke quickly calmed down, “General Wei Chi, this war with Great Han Kingdom is a misunderstanding. If we continue, the casualties on both sides will be more severe. I’m willing to take a step back and hope that General Wei will consider the longstanding friendship between our two kingdoms and not hold us accountable.”

Not holding them accountable was impossible, but he hoped Wei Chi would not continue the attack.

Wei Chi replied, “General Qin, you can rest assured. Before receiving His Majesty’s decree, I won’t launch any further attacks. However, the battlefield needs cleaning up, so we’ll probably camp here tonight. It’s quite far from your camp, and I believe it won’t disturb you and your troops.”

Qin Ke could only endure silently, “Alright.”

After saying that, he turned and led his men back to the camp.

Only then did the soldiers of Great Han Kingdom burst into hearty laughter, feeling both excited and proud.

Wei Chi let them laugh for a while before raising his hand to stop them, “Alright, clean up the battlefield first, and then move the camp here.”

“Yes!”

Back in his tent, Wei Chi wrote a report, detailing the situation on the battlefield, and sent it to the capital.

Yan Ge sat on the side sipping tea. He waited for him to finish before asking, “General, what do you think is going on? Will Youji Kingdom declare war again?”

Wei Chi replied, “Huang Guiqing, our information is limited. However, this sudden war declaration from Youji Kingdom and the subsequent sudden ceasefire make me think there might be internal issues within the Youji Court, maybe even involving their king…” He stopped speaking, unsure of how to continue or feeling that his speculation was too frightening.

Yan Ge seemed to understand something.

Wei Chi continued, “As for whether they will declare war again, it’s hard to say. Nevertheless, I believe we should be prepared as soon as possible and be ready for anything.”

Yan Ge nodded, “General, your words make sense. I know nothing about these matters, and I trust in you completely.”

“Please rest assured, Huang Guiqing,” Wei Chi felt at ease. The fact that Huang Guiqing did not interfere in military affairs allowed him to act without hesitation.

Huang Guiqing’s understanding made him feel respected and valued, motivating him to be even more dedicated.

This was also Yan Ge’s way of utilizing talents.

In the following days, there were no signs of Youji Kingdom declaring war again. However, Wei Chi remained vigilant.

Yan Ge also stayed put, awaiting the decree from Huangfu Yuchen. Furthermore, he saw an opportunity to give the Crown Prince a taste of military camp life and even the atmosphere of the battlefield.

Huangfu Yuchen’s decree arrived swiftly, and it aligned closely with Wei Chi’s thoughts: if the Youji Kingdom ceased hostilities, Great Han did not aggressively pursue conflict. First, Great Han had no ambitions of expansion. Secondly, the people would suffer once war ignited. However, if the Youji Kingdom remained obstinate, Great Han was not to be underestimated; they would surely make them pay. Additionally, Youji Kingdom had to compensate Great Han for the losses incurred in this war,

otherwise, Great Han wouldn’t let matters rest. Huangfu Yuchen had already dispatched envoys to visit the Youji Kingdom and demand an explanation, so Wei Chi had to wait and see Youji Kingdom’s next move.

Yan Ge and Prince Huangfu Yunxi stayed for five more days, but there were no developments from Youji Kingdom, and they left, as there was little they could do by staying there.

Back in the capital, the weather turned colder.

The capital was not affected by the Southwest War, and it was as lively as usual. In fact, not only the capital. Except for the southwest, other areas were not affected. The common people still had great trust in the imperial court.

Yan Ge arrived at Tenglong Palace but found that Huangfu Yuchen had not yet returned. After taking a bath, he still didn’t see him, so he ordered a table of food from the Imperial Kitchen and ate while waiting.

“The Emperor has returned——”

As soon as Huangfu Yuchen entered, he saw his beloved enjoying the food, “Xiao Ge, I’m back.”

“Mhmm.” Yan Ge greeted him and handed him a cup of tea, “It’s late. Did something happened?”

Huangfu Yuchen took a sip of tea. He noticed the skewer of lamb Yan Ge held in his other hand, and smiled, nodding his chin toward it. Yan Ge smiled back and brought the skewer close to his mouth.

Huangfu Yuchen opened his mouth and took a bite, swallowing the lamb. He pulled Yan Ge to sit beside him at the banquet table and spoke, “I received a report from the spies I sent. It seems that Luo Youfeng might be under someone else’s control. The war declaration was not his intention. There’s a suspicious figure manipulating things behind the scenes.”

A palace maid brought water, and Huangfu Yuchen calmly washed his hands.

“Oh?” Yan Ge was surprised, and as he fed Huangfu Yuchen another piece of lamb, he asked, “Do you have any suspicions? What could be their motive?”

Huangfu Yuchen scooped a bowl of soup for Yan Ge and himself, sipping slowly before replying, “Based on all the information we’ve received so far, we can’t determine the motive yet. However, it seems like some kind of testing on their part.”

Yan Ge was intelligent and quickly grasped the situation, “Are you suggesting that this manipulator is using Youji Kingdom to test our military strength? If that’s the case, their strategy Is too ruthless.” His expression turned cold, and he added, “Their test not only caused significant economic losses to both Great Han and Youji, but it also resulted in nearly twenty thousand lives lost. If it weren’t for Qin Ke inexplicably calling off the attack, the consequences could have been even more severe.”

After feeding Yan Ge another scoop of bamboo shoots, Huangfu Yuchen said, “Regardless of who this manipulator is, since they have conducted their test, I believe they’ll take further action soon. Whatever they do next will likely be more severe than Youji Kingdom declaring war against us.”

“Do you have any suspects?” Yan Ge was enjoying the shredded bamboo shoots in his mouth, so Huangfu Yuchen helped him add some more to his bowl.

Huangfu Yuchen paused with his chopsticks in hand, “The security at the Youji Palace is tight, and Luo Youfeng is not a fool. Whoever is controlling him must be quite formidable.”

“Is it Meng Xiaohun again?” Yan Ge’s lips curled into a cold smile, but his voice was calm, “If it’s him, it’s a good thing; we can deal with him thoroughly this time!”

Huangfu Yuchen held his hand, “That’s what I’m thinking too.”

“Oh, by the way,” Yan Ge suddenly remembered something, “If his goal is the throne, Yunxi is also an obstacle. You need to arrange more people to protect him.”

“Don’t worry,” Huangfu Yuchen embraced him, “Let me hold you for a while. Things will get busy soon.”

Yan Ge picked up a towel and wiped his mouth, then relaxed against Huangfu Yuchen.

They didn’t speak, just enjoying each other’s warmth.

Yan Ge fell asleep drowsily and woke up later, still in Huangfu Yuchen’s arms. However, they had moved to the study, where Huangfu Yuchen was looking through documents.

“Awake?”

“What time is it?” Yan Ge didn’t move, glancing outside and yawning.

“Just the hour of You,” Huangfu Yuchen rubbed his temples, “Nothing important will happen these two days. You can play as usual.”

“Okay. There is one thing, though,” Yan Ge yawned again after sleeping too much, “Deng Mande.”

Deng Mande stepped forward, “Yes, Huang Guiqing.”

“Send someone out of the palace to inform Manager Yuan and Wen Xian to have a meal with me tomorrow at noon.”

“Understood.”

Seeing a palace maid bringing in water, Yan Ge got up from Huangfu Yuchen’s embrace, washed his face, and felt more awake. He dampened a towel again, wrung it half dry, and helped Huangfu Yuchen wipe his face. It was like washing a child’s face, he carefully wiped around his eyes, mouth, ears, and behind his ears, suppressing a laugh.

Huangfu Yuchen tilted his face, cooperating with Yan Ge and even praised him, “Baby is so thoughtful; my face feels much better after washing.”

Yan Ge picked a hawthorn fruit from the fruit platter and put it in Huangfu Yuchen’s mouth.

It was a warm and intimate day.

The next day at noon, Yan Ge invited Wen Xian to dine at Liuxian Pavilion. They were joined by Wei Xian and several important managers from the company.

Coincidentally, a few new dishes had been introduced recently, and everyone enjoyed the satisfying meal.

“Liuxian Pavilion is truly extraordinary; after so many years, they can still frequently introduce new dishes,” Wen Xian said, “Fortunately, some of us have substantial savings; otherwise, we wouldn’t be able to afford it.”

Yan Ge said, “It will be better in the future. I plan to sell some of the recipes regularly. Over time, even ordinary commoners will be able to afford these dishes.”

Wen Xian and the others were somewhat surprised. If they were in Yan Ge’s position, they would definitely keep the recipes and not sell them. But when they thought about Yan Ge’s current wealth, they realized that he indeed didn’t care about these recipes and they admired him for his courage. Few people would have the courage to “give up” like him.

As they were eating, the urgent sound of hooves approached from outside.

“Urgent message from Xiguan Pass, urgent message from Xiguan Pass.”

Yan Ge’s expression changed, and he stood up, “I’m sorry, you all continue eating; I need to take care of something.”

Wen Xian nodded understandingly, “Take your time, Boss Yan.”

Yan Ge’s figure disappeared in a flash.

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Yan Ge left Liuxian Pavilion and appeared directly in Huangfu Yuchen's study.

"Xiao Ge?" Huangfu Yuchen put down his pen, "What happened?" He knew Yan Ge was hosting guests at Liuxian Pavilion today, so it must have been something urgent for him to come back so early.

"There is urgent news from Xiguan Pass." Yan Ge sat beside him.

"Mai Kingdom is finally getting restless?" Huangfu Yuchen's elegant eyebrows furrowed slightly, and he calmly said, "Perhaps it's not a bad thing."

"I think so too. This time, we'll teach them a lesson and make sure they won't dare to act rashly for at least the next twenty years!" Yan Ge said.

The two of them calmly sipped their tea. After about half a cup of tea, hurried footsteps were heard outside the door, and a voice called out, "Urgent message from Xiguan Pass."

"Present it."

Deng Mande rushed out to receive the imperial edict from a palace maid and handed it to Huangfu Yuchen.

"Mai Kingdom's one hundred thousand troops have crossed the border, and the first battle was a success." A faint smile appeared on Huangfu Yuchen's lips. "They didn't disappoint me. Deng Mande, draft an edict, order General Yunhui to immediately lead five thousand elite soldiers to escort enough food and forage for one month to Xiguan Pass."

“Yes!”

“Another edict, order General Gui to immediately lead five thousand elite soldiers to escort ten thousand hand grenades to Xiguan Pass.”

“Yes!”

Deng Mande hurriedly left.

Yan Ge asked Huangfu Yuchen, “How many troops are stationed at Xiguan Pass?”

“Eighty thousand,” Huangfu Yuchen replied.

“Eighty thousand?” Yan Ge was somewhat surprised.

“Mai Kingdom poses the greatest threat to us, so Xiguan Pass has the largest number of troops among the border garrisons. Although our forces are smaller than theirs, we have several advantages. If nothing unexpected happens, defeating Mai Kingdom is not a difficult task,” Huangfu Yuchen explained.

Yan Ge scratched his head, “It’s good to know you’re confident.”

“Now it’s October, and the weather will get colder. Mai Kingdom’s people are more resistant to the cold than us, so it’s best to defeat them within two months. Otherwise, our soldiers will suffer,” Huangfu Yuchen calculated in his mind.

Yan Ge leaned on his shoulder and smiled at him.

“What is it?” Huangfu Yuchen asked, feeling better after seeing Yan Ge’s smile. His eyes filled with warmth as he wrapped his arm around Yan Ge’s waist.

“Don’t worry in case it takes too long. I prepared a large number of knee pads, gloves, and shoe pads a long time ago, specifically for winter warfare. Since these things are easily imitated, we’ll only use them at the critical

moment to prevent the enemy from copying us," Yan Ge said with a hint of pride in his voice.

"Knee pads, gloves, and shoe pads?" Although it was the first time Huangfu Yuchen heard these terms, he understood without any difficulty. He hugged Yan Ge and said, "Baby, you've worked hard. When did you prepare all these? Why didn't you tell me earlier so I could help you with the burden?"

"Of course, it was meant to surprise you." Yan Ge waved his hand airily. "These are just trivial matters; no need for you to bother. How about it? Isn't your man treating you well?"

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled, holding him tightly. "Not just well. He's an exceptional wise consort."

Yan Ge shot him a glance, and Huangfu Yuchen pinched his chin, kissing his lips deeply. Their tongues intertwined in each other's mouths, their bodies growing heated. He reluctantly released him slightly, saying, "It's almost time. We'll soon be free from these worldly matters. Once we pass the Nascent Soul stage, we'll break through to the next level together. Then, we'll return to your original world and even explore other dimensions. From then on, we'll be together forever."

Yan Ge paused, "Have you made up your mind? Yunxi is still young…"

"He's not that young anymore," Huangfu Yuchen's tone was resolute. "Besides, once we have the ability to tear through the fabric of time, we can come back to visit at any time."

Yan Ge suddenly felt a sense of urgency. He hadn't even acquired the final techniques yet, and he needed to quickly find a solution to become Empress. This darn system.

"What's wrong? You don't want to leave?" Huangfu Yuchen looked at him oddly.

"Of course not," Yan Ge refocused, wrapping his arms around his neck, and with a smack, he planted a kiss on his chin. "I'll follow your lead, but for

now, dealing with the border crisis is still the top priority. Do you need to discuss official matters with the ministers? I'll head back first."

"Okay," Huangfu Yuchen let him go.

Yan Ge took a couple of steps but turned back and reminded him, "Tell me before you abdicate."

"Of course, we are husband and wife." Huangfu Yuchen smirked.

Yan Ge rolled his eyes at him, then left, feeling worried. He believed that if he told Huangfu Yuchen he wanted to be Empress, he would definitely agree. But even if Huangfu Yuchen were the Emperor, achieving this wouldn't be easy, as it involved many aspects. For example, in the history of Great Han Kingdom, there had never been a male Empress. How would Huangfu Yuchen persuade the courtiers and silence the gossip? Another issue was that the current Empress, Dumu, had never committed any major mistakes. If they rashly deposed her, would she be willing to accept it? Would the Du family let it go? If something went wrong, Yunxi might hold resentment.

But no matter what, he was determined to become the Empress. He just needed to figure out how to do it. It was indeed a challenge.

"Little Jin."

Yan Jin's voice sounded in his mind, "Master, what can I do for you?"

"What do you think I should do to become the Empress?"

Yan Jin's response was straightforward, "Just tell the Emperor directly, and he will agree."

Saying that was as good as saying nothing.

"I'm your master, can't you make an exception and give me the final technique directly?" Yan Ge asked without much hope.

Yan Jin sighed, “I can do it, but the consequence will be that I’ll self-destruct.”

Yan Ge quickly said, “Let’s forget about that. If it’s not possible, I’ll just tell Yuchen directly, and let him handle the other problems.”

Yan Jin said, “I wholeheartedly support that!”

Yan Ge immediately pushed his worries aside. It was still a long way before Huangfu Yuchen’s abdication. He would deal with it when the time came.

He turned and left the palace without taking the carriage, riding a horse instead, and heading leisurely forward.

The people on the street greeted him respectfully. The news of the war at Xiguan Pass hadn’t spread yet, so the capital was still calm.

Upon reaching the company, he had someone bring all the account books of his properties and went through them one by one.

“Summon the staff.”

Wan Xiang hurriedly came over, “Young Master.”

“It’s you, Wan Xiang.” Yan Ge looked up. Wan Xiang had married Zhao Cheng two years ago, and he was now in charge. Yan Ge gave them the slave contract as a gift. Although they were now free individuals, their loyalty remained strong, making them valuable assistants.

“Give the order to all the managers to count the inventory of their properties and submit it to me by tomorrow evening.”

“Yes.”

After dealing with the company’s affairs, Yan Ge returned to Yan Mansion in the same unhurried manner.

Madam Yan was in the side room, sitting by the window and doing embroidery. The room was warmed by a charcoal stove and she was sitting

on a furry bear skin that her eldest son had personally hunted and sent back from the distant Western Frontier. A small blanket made from tiger skin covered her knees, a gift from her younger son. Ever since her daughter-in-law and grandson also went to Xiguan Pass, she had plenty of free time and picked up her hobbies from her youth to pass the time.

Yan Ge approached quietly to take a look and marveled at her skill. Madam Yan's embroidery displayed a gradual change of colors, from dark to light, just like the real thing.

Afraid of startling her with a sudden sound, he retreated to the door and called out, "Mother."

"Ge'er, you're back. Come and sit." Madam Yan smiled, beckoning him over.

"Mother, take breaks while embroidering, don't strain your eyes," Yan Ge sat beside her.

Madam Yan smiled and said, "Don't worry, ever since I started taking the health pills you prepared for me, my health has improved. Just yesterday, I went to the temple to pray and climbed all the way to the mountain top without feeling tired." Despite being in her forties, Madam Yan looked no older than thirty, with not a single wrinkle on her face. Whenever she attended gatherings with other official wives, they all envied her. Madam Yan also knew how to get along with people and occasionally sent some beauty creams or pills to other wives.

In the feudal society, women rarely had the chance to go out, so they didn't have too many hobbies. Mostly, they spent their time tending to flowers and doing embroidery. Yan Ge could tell that Madam Yan felt a bit lonely since her grandson had left. He put his arm around her shoulders, considering the idea of bringing Yan Xiangtian back for a while. However, given the current sensitive situation, he couldn't bring up the topic to Madam Yan for the time being.

"How about Father?"

“He’s in the backyard. This year seems colder than the last, so he’s directing the servants to wrap the trees to prevent freezing. By now, he probably knows you’re back.”

As soon as she finished speaking, a voice came from outside, accompanied by a cold breeze as a figure stepped inside. “Ge’er is back.”

Yan Ge stood up, “Father.”

“Greetings, Huang Guiqing.” The steward, Yan Fu, bowed.

“No need for formalities.”

“I’ll go prepare some refreshments.” Yan Fu tactfully left.

“Why did you come in the afternoon?” Yan Xiaojing knew Yan Ge well. He usually returned in the morning unless there was something urgent.

“I had some free time today, so I came to visit. Father, Mother said you were protecting the trees just now?”

Yan Xiaojing replied, “Do you want to see?”

“I’m curious. I never paid attention to it before.” Yan Ge walked with him outside.

Madam Yan shook her head, “It’s so cold, yet you two aren’t afraid of freezing.” She made a casual remark and then lowered her head to continue embroidering.

Yan Ge and Yan Xiaojing walked along the path and soon arrived at the backyard. With a sweep of his spiritual sense, Yan Ge confirmed that there were no other people in the garden apart from the two of them.

“Father, Yuchen just received an urgent message from Xiguan Pass. The Mai Kingdom has declared war on us.”

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Yan Xiaojing immediately thought of his eldest son, daughter-in-law, and grandson. “I’ll arrange for someone to bring your sister in law and Tiantian back immediately.” As for his eldest son, he didn’t mention him. He knew that Yan Su wouldn’t leave the Western Frontier at this critical time.

“Father, you don’t need to worry. I’ve already made arrangements to protect big brother,” Yan Ge said. “As for sister-in-law and Tiantian, leave them to me.”

“Very well.” Yan Xiaojing was a civil official and had limited subordinates with martial skills.

“Should I tell your Mother about this?”

Yan Ge hesitated. “You decide.”

Yan Xiaojing nodded.

The news of the war between the Mai Kingdom and Great Han quickly spread, and the court didn’t hide it. Large quantities of provisions were transported outside the capital, and the common people could guess that the border was at war. However, the border was far away from them, so they weren’t too worried. The teahouses and restaurants were now filled with more customers, and discussions mainly revolved around the war between the two kingdoms. However, in the feudal society, the common people didn’t have much say, and even if they discussed, they didn’t dare to go too deep into political matters, as it was considered a grave offense.

After receiving the statistics of his properties, Yan Ge was satisfied and issued several orders to mobilize eighty percent of the stock. Whenever

Xiguan Pass needed urgent supplies, they could be quickly transported there, ensuring that the soldiers had no worries during the battle.

The war had been going on for nearly a month, and there was still no clear winner. Huangfu Yuchen's brow furrowed, and he became busier, spending most of his time in the imperial study, receiving reports and meeting with important officials.

"Report—Emperor, this is a dispatch from Xiguan Pass."

"Present it."

Upon reading the contents of the dispatch, Huangfu Yuchen's face immediately turned grave. "A mysterious black-clad force with nearly a thousand members has appeared in the ranks of the Mai Kingdom, and they inflicted a loss of nearly ten thousand soldiers in a battle five days ago."

The faces of the officials changed dramatically. How terrifying was a force that could eliminate ten thousand soldiers with only one thousand members?

"Prepare immediately. I will lead the troops in person."

Yan Ge's steps halted just outside the imperial study. Has Meng Xiaohun finally shown himself?

"Your Majesty, this is not advisable!" Grand Tutor You urgently pleaded, kneeling down. "You are the pillar of the kingdom. How can you risk yourself like this?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Jiang Gan also frowned, "General Cao is courageous and wise, and the soldiers at the border are all valiant fighters. I believe General Cao can handle this crisis."

"Your Majesty, I also think it's not advisable. Please reconsider," King Zhong looked somewhat surprised, feeling that the Emperor's decision was too impulsive and unlike his usual style.

“No need to say more.” Huangfu Yuchen waved his hand resolutely and looked towards the closed door. “My decision is final.”

A voice came from outside the door, announcing, “Huang Guiqing is here __”

The Grand Tutor and the others were overjoyed, believing that Huang Guiqing would be persuaded the emperor to change his mind.

“I hope I’m not interrupting,” Yan Ge said with a smile.

Huangfu Yuchen walked over and took him to sit behind the Imperial desk. “Not at all.”

Jiang Gan said, “Huang Guiqing, just now, His Majesty mentioned leading the troops in person. We tried to persuade him, but to no avail. We ask Huang Guiqing to try to persuade him as well.”

Yan Ge knew that the formidable force of one thousand soldiers was likely led by Meng Xiaohun. Meng Xiaohun was no ordinary character, and ordinary soldiers couldn’t deal with him. Moreover, this was the karma between Yuchen and Meng Xiaohun. Yuchen had to resolve it personally; otherwise, Meng Xiaohun’s existence could become a formidable obstacle to Yuchen’s advancement.

“His Majesty must have deep reasons for making such a decision,” Yan Ge looked at Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. “The appearance of this one thousand soldiers has caused significant casualties, and our morale must be low. My personal presence can boost morale, and I can gain firsthand information about the situation. As for my safety, all of you need not worry. I will take the Jingxiu Guards with me.”

“Jingxiu Guards?”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “The Jingxiu Guards are a group of ten thousand specially trained soldiers, handpicked from the best. With them protecting

me, all of you can rest assured, right?”

The officials were still worried, and they looked at Yan Ge.

Yan Ge smiled confidently and remained silent.

Huangfu Yuchen continued, “During my absence, Huang Guiqing will act as a regent and handle the state affairs. I hope all of you will support him.”

Grand Tutor You and the others were surprised again, their faces filled with astonishment. While Huang Guiqing was indeed capable, it didn’t change the fact that he was a palace consort. To have a consort manage the state affairs was unprecedented.

Yan Ge was also taken aback but soon calmed down.

“Your Majesty, this…” King Zhong didn’t know what to say. He was greatly surprised. Historically, emperors were usually suspicious, but the Emperor was trusting Huang Guiqing with the state affairs. How could he trust Huang Guiqing so much?

“I believe in Huang Guiqing. I wouldn’t joke about Great Han’s survival,” Huangfu Yuchen said.

When he said that, the officials could not object.

Yan Ge smiled faintly. “Leave it to me.”

Jiang Gan was puzzled. The Emperor and Huang Guiqing had always been inseparable, but this time, Huang Guiqing didn’t propose to go with the Emperor?

Huangfu Yuchen would collide head-on with Meng Xiaohun at Xiguan Pass. How could Yan Ge not worry? However, he had to stay in the capital to coordinate and dispatch various military supplies based on the battlefield reports, ensuring they were quickly transported to the front lines. He couldn’t trust this crucial task to anyone else, as the situation on the battlefield changed rapidly. A small oversight could lead to a major disaster. Hence, he had no choice but to stay in the capital.

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at Jiang Gan, Luo Wei, King Zhong, Grand Tutor You and the others, and took Yan Ge away with him.

The two of them walked on the road leading to Tenglong Palace, not saying a word for a long time.

“My dear, I will be fine,” Huangfu Yuchen spoke first.

Yan Ge subconsciously held his hand tightly. “Please be careful.”

“Don’t worry, we still have many places to go, and we’ll be together for a long time. So, I will be fine.” Huangfu Yuchen held the back of his head and gently kissed his lips, then took out a jade pendant and handed it to Yan Ge. “Remember this?”

Yan Ge’s eyes brightened. When they saved a group of martial artists in the Mai Kingdom, they owed a favor to him and Yuchen.

“I know what to do.”

Huangfu Yuchen left that day with five thousand Jingxiu Guards. Another five thousand elite guards were already stationed near Xiguan Pass.

The common people in the capital were excited and moved when they heard that the Emperor intended to lead the troops in person. They bid farewell along the way, hoping for the Emperor and the soldiers’ triumphant return.

Yan Ge stood on the tallest tower, continuously watching Huangfu Yuchen. From a distance, he saw Huangfu Yuchen turning back and giving him a smile.

‘I’m waiting for you, Yuchen.’

Huangfu Yuchen’s lips curled, and then he turned away, urging his horse forward, “Proceed—”

After several days of continuous travel, he finally arrived at Xiguan Pass. Before entering the city, Huangfu Yuchen heard the rumbling sounds of grenades exploding on the battlefield.

Upon receiving the imperial edict, Cao Zhan sent Deputy General Ye to welcome the Emperor.

The ten-thousand-man army headed straight for the camp.

Huangfu Yuchen rode his horse towards Cao Zhan, who was intently observing the battlefield from his warhorse.

“How’s the situation?”

“Your Majesty, this humble subordinate pays his respects.”

Cao Zhan was about to dismount, but Huangfu Yuchen stopped him.

Cao Zhan said, “That mysterious force of one thousand has bizarre martial skills; our soldiers… are no match for them.”

Huangfu Yuchen unleashed his spiritual sense, his gaze turning cold. With just one look, he confirmed that this force of one thousand people was cultivated by Meng Xiaohun; their martial arts were the same as Meng Xiaohun’s.

He raised his hand, “Have two thousand Qi Condensation stage cultivators join the battle.”

“Yes!”

Qi Condensation stage cultivators? Cao Zhan heard this term for the first time, but it wasn’t the time to be concerned about that. He immediately turned his attention to the battlefield.

The two thousand Qi Condensation stage cultivators rushed into the battle, directly charging towards the one thousand black-clad figures. Thanks to their black cloaks, the cultivators could identify them easily.

The addition of cultivators allowed the overwhelmed Great Han soldiers to catch their breath and discreetly deal with the ordinary Mai soldiers.

In a restaurant in the capital, Jing Cheng, Wen Xian and Weiju Shen were having a meal when they heard exclamations from the people outside. They became curious and walked to the window, widening their eyes at the scene before them.

On the spacious concrete road, ten people from the Zhenyuan Escort Bureau were riding horses, followed by a continuous line of identical carriages. Each carriage was pulled by four horses, loaded with goods covered by black rainproof cloth.

The carriages had double-sided flags, one side embroidered with “Nanyi First Company” and the other side with “Supporting the Border.” A smaller flag was attached to each carriage, with words like “Food”, “Clothing”, “Medicine,” etc… One carriage, two carriages, three carriages… there were a total of one hundred carriages stretching for miles, and two Zhenyuan Escort Bureau personnel guarded each carriage. After the last carriage was another group of Zhenyuan Escort Bureau personnel.

“The court already sent one hundred carriages of military supplies to the border yesterday, and today, Huang Guiqing sent another one hundred carriages of supplies. Great Han will surely win!” A commoner in the crowd couldn’t contain his excitement and shouted aloud.

His emotions infected others, and they joined in, shouting, “Great Han will win! Great Han will win…”

“Damn it, I’ll donate supplies too.”

“I will too.”

…..

In the imperial study, Yan Ge was completely unaware of the sensation his actions caused and efficiently gave orders.

“Minister of War, supervise the armory to increase production speed and be ready to replenish grenades at Xiguan Pass. But be mindful of the workers’ safety, even in the urgency.”

“Yes!”

“Minister of Finance, prepare the second batch of provisions as soon as possible and be ready to escort them out of the capital.”

“Yes!”

“Minister of Rites, plan for the celebration feast in advance.”

The ministers exchanged glances, feeling excited. Huang Guiqing’s confident tone boosted their confidence as well.

“Yes,” the Minister of Rites responded.

“Minister of Personnel, immediately send homing pigeons to the various relay stations along the route from the capital to Xiguan Pass, instructing them to prepare enough horses in advance for the teams transporting provisions to change horses.”

“Yes!”

“Minister of Public Works and Minister of Justice, don’t be idle either. Maintaining order in the capital is your responsibility. Even if the border is in chaos, the capital cannot be chaotic.”

“Yes, please rest assured, Huang Guiqing”

King Zhong and Grand Tutor You listened to Yan Ge’s well-organized and detailed arrangements, and their hearts were at ease.

“Gao Feng.”

Gao Feng, Gao Yun, Jun Xiang, and Lu Fei did not accompanying Huangfu Yuchen to the Xiguan Pass; they were still serving by Yan Ge’s side and were waiting outside the imperial study.

“Yes, Huang Guiqing.”

Yan Ge handed him several letters. “Deliver these letters to the company and give them to Wan Xiang. She knows what to do.”

“Yes.”

After making all the necessary arrangements, Yan Ge stretched his arms and looked at Grand Tutor You and the others with a smile. “You have worked hard these days. Try to rest in the palace as much as possible. This young lord is still new to handling state affairs and relies on your guidance.”

King Zhong replied on behalf of the group, “Huang Guiqing is too modest. We are honored to share both joys and sorrows with His Majesty and Huang Guiqing.”

MCUS Chapter 209

The was at the border was ablaze, and the war between Great Han and the Mai Kingdom had reached a fever pitch. Both kingdoms' soldiers were all red-eyed, wielding their large swords ruthlessly, even fighting bare-handed when their weapons were lost, engaging in intense combat. A cavalryman charged, skillfully thrusting his long spear into an enemy's neck, causing blood to spurt out. The scent of gunpowder mixed with the smell of blood, stimulating their noses and lungs and making their stomachs churn uncomfortably. Battle cries and drum beats echoed, seemingly shaking the very heavens and earth, as dark clouds rolled and storm approached.

Huangfu Yuchen sat on his horse majestically, his spiritual sense stealthily wandering through the sky, diving into the enemy camp to search for Meng Xiaohun's trace.

Inside an inconspicuous tent, a man dressed entirely in black seemed to sense something. His eyes suddenly turned sharp, and he immediately attempted to dodge.

However, Huangfu Yuchen's cold voice resonated in the man's mind, "Meng Xiaohun, don't you want to settle things with me? Or are you afraid?"

A strange smile appeared on Meng Xiaohun's face, "Taking down Great Han doesn't require me to take action personally. Why should I dirty my hands with you?"

"Oh? So you're that confident?" Huangfu Yuchen's voice grew even colder.

Meng Xiaohun sat down leisurely, crossing his arms, "The Mai Kingdom soldiers on the battlefield are quite average in strength, hasn't Your Majesty

noticed?”

Huangfu Yuchen suddenly had a bad feeling.

Meng Xiaohun seemed to guess his thoughts and kindly explained, “They carry a plague virus, your soldiers are already doomed.”

“Plague!” Huangfu Yuchen’s heart sank, “All thirty thousand the Mai Kingdom soldiers have contracted the plague?”

“Correct.” Meng Xiaohun chuckled in satisfaction.

“You deliberately infected them with the plague, with the purpose of spreading it to my soldiers?” Huangfu Yuchen knew Huangfu Yuhu’s ruthlessness, but he didn’t expect him to be so merciless. A chill ran through him.

“Correct.” Meng Xiaohun remained calm and even crossed his legs, “Even if you withdraw now, it’s too late. Your soldiers have already contracted the plague. Once they have it, it’s like a terminal illness, even the most skilled medical experts can’t save them. Hahaha…”

Huangfu Yuchen retracted his spiritual sense, his face livid.

“Your Majesty?” Cao Zhan was puzzled. Great Han’s soldiers had gained the upper hand, so why did the Emperor look so grim?

“Yang Zhuo?”

Yang Zhuo was among the entourage and immediately replied, “Here!”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Didn’t I bring a carriage full of supplies? Go immediately and bring out the medicinal powder from inside. Boil it with wormwood to make a soup, have all the soldiers drink a bowl, and replace the soldiers on the battlefield, let them all drink a bowl too.”

“Yes! Your Majesty!” Yang Zhuo hastened on his horse to execute the order.

Cao Zhan didn’t understand, “Your Majesty, may I ask what’s happening?”

Cao Zhan was the main general, so Huangfu Yuchen didn’t hide anything, but he waved away the others around him, “The Mai Kingdom soldiers are infected with the plague, and I’m afraid it has already spread to our soldiers. However, I brought the medicinal herbs prepared by Xiao Ge, which can cure and prevent the plague. There’s no need to panic.”

Cao Zhan’s hanging heart settled, “Understood.”

Huangfu Yuchen once again lamented that his treasure was truly his good fortune. The battlefield would have many corpses, and they couldn’t be buried in time, which was most likely to breed a plague. This problem had always been the most troublesome for monarchs and generals. Before departing, he asked Yan Ge if there were any ways to prevent or treat the plague, and Yan Ge had let him bring this batch of medicinal herbs. He never expected that this batch of medicine that was capable of preventing and treating the plague was the “chicken eggs” Yan Ge collected during their trip to the Demon Fortress. They were dried like little stones and then ground into powder.

Even if he was already assured of victory, he was covered in a cold sweat. If Yan Ge hadn’t collected those foul-smelling things, not only would these border soldiers lose their lives, but the entire Great Han would be affected. Huangfu Yuhu was truly ruthless.

“Report—” A soldier rushed over.

“Report to Your Majesty and General, a batch of military supplies has arrived.”

“So fast?” Cao Zhan was pleasantly surprised.

The soldier replied, “This batch of supplies was provided by Huang Guiqing’s First Company, free of charge.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s eyes flashed with a warm smile, “What was sent?”

The soldier replied, “Twenty carriages of food and forage, thirty carriages of clothing, twenty carriages of meat, twenty carriages of eggs, and ten carriages of medicinal herbs.”

“Good, you may leave.”

“Yes!”

Yang Zhuo and several deputy generals marveled secretly. Huang Guiqing was really generous. However, the soldiers were fortunate. If they still couldn’t win with this support, they wouldn’t deserve Huang Guiqing’s thoughtfulness.

The smile on Huangfu Yuchen’s face quickly faded, and his spiritual sense once again probed Meng Xiaohun’s tent.

Meng Xiaohun was sitting inside, somewhat bored. He checked the time. It was already noon, so he had a table of delicacies delivered: bear paw, camel hump stew, spicy stir-fried clams, crispy milk-white shrimp, and spicy braised oysters and tofu soup, a feast of rare delicacies.

However, after almost half an hour, the good news he was waiting for hadn’t arrived. Thinking of Huangfu Yuchen’s capabilities, his smile disappeared and his face turned an angry, gloomy gray.

He threw away his chopsticks, suddenly opened the tent, and walked out in large strides.

At this moment, a wave of killing intent struck without warning from mid-air, both imposing and overwhelming.

Meng Xiaohun’s eyes turned cold and he hurriedly dodged, taking several steps in mid-air like he was climbing stairs. He leaped into the air to see that the Great Han soldiers below were not getting weaker, but rather fighting with increasing fierceness. He couldn’t believe it. “This can’t be!”

Huangfu Yuchen’s figure flashed before him. He was also flying into mid-air, his cold gaze piercing him as he calmly said, “Nothing is impossible.

Just like how even my most beloved brother could betray me.”

Meng Xiaohun’s eyes flickered.

The soldiers below exclaimed, staring in astonishment at the imposing man standing in mid-air. He was wearing a bright yellow imperial robe, as if he appeared out of nowhere.

Huangfu Yuchen focused his inner qi, loudly proclaiming, “I am the true monarch, blessed with immortal techniques, destined to become a dragon and ascend to immortality. Kill the Mai Kingdom people and show the might of our nation!”

“Yes!” The soldiers were excited. Their morale rose, and they roared in high spirits as they charged forward.

Meng Xiaohun stared at Huangfu Yuchen in disbelief.

“Great Han has medicine to cure the plague. It seems your intelligence hasn’t caught up.” Huangfu Yuchen scrutinized Meng Xiaohun and saw traces of his brother in him.

Meng Xiaohun pretended to remain calm, glaring at him with resentment.

“Why?” Huangfu Yuchen asked calmly.

Meng Xiaohun replied, “Why what?”

Huangfu Yuchen repeated, “Huangfu Yuhu, where did I wrong you, and why did you betray me?”

A familiar and indifferent voice echoed in Meng Xiaohun’s mind.

–“Ding. Main mission – Kill Great Han’s Emperor, Huangfu Yuchen. Mission rewards when successfully: one million silver, Ninth Layer of the Overlord’s Curse. Accept the mission, ‘Yes,’ decline the mission, ‘No.’”

“Because I not only want to be Emperor of Great Han but also the overlord of the entire continent!” Meng Xiaohun unhesitatingly accepted the

mission. He closed the “Overlord Development System” interface in front of him, not denying that he was Huangfu Yuhu.

Huangfu Yuchen’s feelings for him had long been worn away by his betrayal, and hearing this answer, he was not disappointed. He drew out his spiritual sword and said, “Since you’ve betrayed me, I’ll kill you. Even Father Emperor and Mother Empress beneath the yellow springs won’t blame me.”

At the thought of Father Emperor and Mother Empress, Meng Xiaohun’s eyes showed a trace of guilt, but it vanished in an instant. His gaze turned cold and heartless once more, and he sneered, “Alright, since you put it that way, I don’t need to show you any mercy.”

With that, he activated an incantation and moved his hands together. Black mist materialized out of thin air between his palms, resembling two fierce beasts. They ferociously lunged toward Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen’s powerful spiritual sense easily captured his movements. Under the dominance of his sharp spiritual awareness, Meng Xiaohun’s actions seemed like they were in slow motion. He swung his spiritual sword in a sweeping motion, and the abundant spiritual qi contained within the sword burst forth, forcibly dispersing the black mist and aiming at Meng Xiaohun’s heart.

Meng Xiaohun shifted mid-air and stabilized himself. As if there was an elastic rope in his hands, he suddenly pulled in opposite directions, and the black mist, as of possessing a will of its own, retracted suddenly and then shot out, one up and one down, attacking Huangfu Yuchen.

A bone-chilling cold rushed over and Huangfu Yuchen activated the true qi in his dantian, advancing instead of retreating. His spiritual sword circled in the air, suddenly disappearing, and then appearing two inches in front of Meng Xiaohun’s face, stabbing fiercely.

Meng Xiaohun quickly recited a spell, shrinking his body when it was just an inch, sidestepping and deftly avoiding Huangfu Yuchen’s attack.

Huangfu Yuchen slightly distanced himself from Meng Xiaohun, and formed some gestures with both hands. Between him and Meng Xiaohun, a bright light that was as white as snow burst open, releasing dazzling silver rays.

Caught off guard, Meng Xiaohun closed his eyes due to the light. Sensing the killing intent near his chest, he knew that he was in danger and immediately opened his eyes, swiftly evading.

A white sword qi shot out from the light, leaving a sword mark about an arm’s length on his chest with a crisp “shua”.

MCUS Chapter 210

Meng Xiaohun didn’t care about the wounds on his body. With an incantation, the bloodstain disappeared. He underestimated Huangfu Yuchen. Over the years, they both improved their skills. The sword in Huangfu Yuchen’s hand seemed extraordinary, possessing immense power. If he could snatch that sword, his strength would soar!

Meng Xiaohun narrowed his eyes, and the dissipating black mist in his palms intensified, forming two black sword energies. With a loud shout, the dual swords attacked, suddenly elongating like two black pillars fiercely crashing towards Huangfu Yuchen.

Enormous pressure rushed towards Huangfu Yuchen, forcing him back three steps. He realized that the attack descended at an angle, and beneath him were soldiers engaged in a battle. He didn’t care about the lives of the Mai Kingdom soldiers, but he couldn’t disregard the soldiers of Great Han.

Meng Xiaohun grinned in triumph, his eyes showing no disguise of his calculation.

Huangfu Yuchen steadied himself, retreating two more steps before channeling true qi into the spiritual sword, grasping the hilt with both hands and launching an imposing attack as if opening the heavens and earth. Surging true qi burst in the air like a thunderclap, rapidly crushing the black mist and Meng Xiaohun.

Startled, Meng Xiaohun hastily dodged backward.

Huangfu Yuchen relentlessly pursued, subtly driving Meng Xiaohun away from the battlefield, gradually distancing themselves from the fight.

At first, Cao Zhan and the others below watched with nervousness but soon calmed down and started commanding the battle calmly.

“Report – General, a group of martial artists from the martial world have arrived outside the camp.”

Cao Zhan frowned, “What do they want?”

“They say they’ve come to help.”

Cao Zhan was taken aback, “Help? Martial artists from the martial world have always—”

Before he could finish, a large group of people on horseback rushed forward. Among them were men and women, all dressed as martial artists.

Several deputy generals by Cao Zhan’s side gripped their weapons vigilantly.

In the crowd, Cao Zhan spotted the head of Yingshan Hall, Zeng Shouli, and his expression relaxed slightly. Zeng Shouli would never go against the court, so he could deduce the intentions of the other martial artists.

The group of martial artists passed by Cao Zhan without stopping, directly dismounting their horses and fearlessly joining the fierce battle.

“General, these people are so arrogant!” one of the deputy generals exclaimed angrily.

Cao Zhan gestured, “It’s not the time to argue. Instruct the kitchen to prepare food for these hundreds of people.”

“Yes.”

The sect leader of the Luna Worshiping Sect accompanied by two disciples nodded at Cao Zhan and passed by swiftly.

In the distance, Huangfu Yuchen and Meng Xiaohun were evenly matched, their powerful attacks producing thunderous sounds that shook the earth.

The wind blew even stronger, and dark clouds swiftly moved, becoming thicker and heavier, as if the sky was about to collapse.

Meng Xiaohun couldn't take down Huangfu Yuchen for a long time and he frowned. But he wasn't an impulsive person, having spent years plotting and planning, rather than becoming anxious, he grew even calmer, moving like a shooting star and evading another attack from Huangfu Yuchen.

He opened his mouth and uttered a few sinister words: "Annihilation Decree, Kill!"

Intense black mist surged. It spread rapidly, enclosing him and Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen's heart trembled, and he activated ninety percent of his true qi to protect his entire body. The black mist was so potent that he felt as if he was surrounded by countless Meng Xiaohuns.

"Hmph! Die!" Meng Xiaohun roared, his two arms engulfed in dense mist transformed into two black giant blades, slashing towards Huangfu Yuchen. Simultaneously, the surrounding black mist, as if receiving an order, crept closer, dense killing intent pressing down on Huangfu Yuchen's head.

Huangfu Yuchen stared at Meng Xiaohun's emotionless eyes, shook his head inwardly, and his gaze turned cold. A silver light flashed from Huangfu Yuchen's body, fearlessly meeting Meng Xiaohun's attack.

The clash left neither with an advantage.

The brief silver light caught Meng Xiaohun's attention, and he thought Huangfu Yuchen had unleashed a powerful move. However, the force of his attack remained the same as before. This made him suspicious and his attacks became more ferocious.

Huangfu Yuchen endured the pressure from the black mist, retaliating while intentionally circling Meng Xiaohun.

Meng Xiaohun became flustered. He knew he couldn’t drag on any longer. His two giant blades slashed at Huangfu Yuchen with incredible speed, creating sharp, ear-piercing whistles.

“Die!”

Suddenly, Huangfu Yuchen stood still and merely made a diagonal stabbing motion from the left side.

Meng Xiaohun was overjoyed, thinking Huangfu Yuchen dared to underestimate him. This would cause his certain death!

He promptly dodged to the other side, but his body suddenly felt intense pain as someone attacked him from behind!

He couldn’t believe it. He looked down, and saw a sword piercing through his abdomen from behind.

The sword made of qi had fulfilled its purpose, and it dissolved into smoke without a trace. In an instant, crimson blood gushed from the wound on his abdomen.

Huangfu Yuchen appeared in front of Meng Xiaohun in an instant, striking his heart with a palm.

Meng Xiaohun spurted out blood with a “puff” and weakly knelt on the ground, “Impossible, this can’t be!”

He turned his head with difficulty, and a familiar figure appeared before him. The figure then calmly walked to Huangfu Yuchen’s side.

This person looked exactly like Huangfu Yuchen!

“You, you…” Meng Xiaohun stared doubtfully at the second Huangfu Yuchen, not even paying attention to the system prompt in his mind, “Ding. The host is about to die. Countdown to death, 30, 29, 28, 27…”

Huangfu Yuchen crouched in front of him, gently wiping away the blood from the corner of Meng Xiaohun’s mouth, “Me and Xiao Ge are

cultivators of the heaven and earth energy. When we reach a high level of cultivation, we can ascend to become immortals. This is my clone. I originally planned to prepare a Foundation Building Pill for you, but… “

“I…” Meng Xiaohun opened his mouth, spewing another mouthful of blood. He weakly grasped Huangfu Yuchen’s hand, almost squeezing blood out of it. His eyes showed a swift flow of complex and indiscernible emotions, perhaps hatred, regret, supplication, or relief.

“5, 4, 3, 2, 1.”

Meng Xiaohun’s hand lost strength, falling weakly to the ground, lifeless.

Huangfu Yuchen remained there, unmoving for a long time.

“Yuchen!”

Huangfu Yuchen snapped back to reality and walked to Yan Ge who appeared in front of him. “Baby, why did you come? Were you worried about me?”

“Yes, after I made all the other arrangements, I teleported directly here.” Yan Ge spotted Meng Xiaohun’s corpse and looked at Huangfu Yuchen’s face with worry.

Huangfu Yuchen pulled him into his embrace, holding him tightly. His lover always appeared when he needed him the most.

Huangfu Yuchen released him and held his hand. He temporarily stored the body of Huangfu Yuhu in his storage ring, then smiled at Yan Ge, “Let’s go back.”

Under the power of the Jingxu Guards and the martial artists, the Mai Kingdom soldiers were soon defeated.

The Mai Kingdom commander soon sent someone to ask for peace.

Cao Zhan ignored him, directly driving back the Mai Kingdom soldiers three to four miles before stopping the battle. The negotiation followed, and

needless to say, the Mai Kingdom had to cede territory and pay reparations.

Huangfu Yuchen instructed Cao Zhan to treat the martial artists hospitably and then set off back to the capital.

The common people of the capital knew that the Emperor had won a victorious battle and celebrated with joy. The city was lively, as if it was the New Year.

Huangfu Yuchen sent Meng Xiaohun's body to the tomb of Prince Dai, finally ending this bitter fate.

Yan Ge knew that Huangfu Yuchen would begin preparations for abdication. As he hadn't found a good way to become Empress, he had to directly talk to Huangfu Yuchen.

"Yuchen, there's something I want to tell you."

"Perfect, I have something to tell you too." Huangfu Yuchen hugged his waist, lowered his head, and kissed his lips. "Baby, be my empress."

"Ah?" Yan Ge was stunned.

Huangfu Yuchen was amused by his expression and chuckled. Holding his lover's face, he kissed his lips again and explained, "Baby, you are the only one in my heart. I want you to be my empress. I know it would be awkward for a man to be an empress, so you only need to do it for a few days. After I abdicate, we will leave together."

Yan Ge was still dumbfounded.

"You don't want to?" Huangfu Yuchen asked.

Yan Ge snapped back to reality and hurriedly said, "I want to, I really want to. Yuchen, I love you so much!" How could his man be so thoughtful? He excitedly pounced on Huangfu Yuchen and kissed him firmly on the cheek.

"Hehe…" Huangfu Yuchen felt very relaxed as well. After he abdicated, he and his beloved would be completely free.

Both of them were excited and unconsciously rolled together for nearly an hour before calming down.

Huangfu Yuchen caressed his lover’s smooth shoulders, unwilling to let go.

When they settled down, Yan Ge expressed his concerns, “What about Yunxi, the empress, and the Duanmu family?”

Huangfu Yuchen remained calm, “After I abdicate, the crown prince will naturally ascend the throne. The Duanmu family won’t have any objections, and the empress will have no objections either. After the crown prince ascends the throne, she will be the Empress Dowager, which is an even more honorable status.”

Seeing that Yan Ge was still worried, Huangfu Yuchen continued, “Actually, I’ve already made arrangements for these matters. As for Yunxi, I’ve already explained everything to him. I’ve also already discussed it with the Empress, and she has no objections. After Yunxi ascends the throne, her heart will be even more at ease.”

Yan Ge finally felt reassured and leaned against Huangfu Yuchen’s chest, closing his eyes, “That’s good.”

Huangfu Yuchen held him contentedly, “Go to sleep.”

Afterward, Huangfu Yuchen was busy with post-war matters, while Yan Ge returned to the Yan Mansion. He had to confess the matter of cultivating to Yan Xiaojing. He had considered having their whole family cultivate, but Yan Xiaojing was a civil official and had an average physique. As for Madam Yan, she was not familiar with cultivation at all. Even if they were to cultivate, it would be very difficult for them, especially during the Tribulation. Lady Wen would face the same challenges. That’s why he hadn’t told his brother about cultivating all this time. However, Yan Su and Yan Xiangtian could cultivate.

Back at the Yan Mansion, Yan Xiaojing, Madam Yan, and Lady Wen were present. Yan Su had earned merit during the war and was currently on his way back to the capital.

After a brief exchange of greetings, Yan Ge got straight to the point, “Father, Mother, I have something to tell you.”

Lady Wen tactfully led Yan Xiangtian away.

“What is it?” Yan Xiaojing asked.

Yan Ge revealed that he was a cultivator, but the source of his techniques was still the mysterious “master.”

Yan Xiaojing and Madam Yan were both too surprised to say anything.

“So, both you and the emperor are cultivators?” Yan Xiaojing regained his senses first.

“Yes,” Yan Ge nodded, “However, even if we ascend, it will take several hundred years.” He had already decided to suppress his cultivation in the future, so as not to worry Yan Xiaojing and Madam Yan if he ascended too early. He truly regarded them as his biological parents, and at the very least, he would wait until they were gone before ascending.

***Ascending is different from crossing to Yan Ge’s original world.**

Madam Yan covered her chest, feeling quite shocked by something she had never heard of before.

Yan Ge said, “Father, Mother, actually, both of you could cultivate, but… you’re both quite old, and secondly, your physical constitutions are relatively weak. I’m worried that cultivation might not be a good thing for you. However, if you decide to cultivate, I will personally guide you.”

Yan Xiaojing didn’t hesitate and shook his head, “Both your mother and I are getting old. It’s better to live a stable life. Su’er and Xiangtian can do it,

though.”

Madam Yan also said, “I’m just a woman of the household; I can’t handle such things.”

Yan Ge felt a little sad, “If you both don’t cultivate, in the future…”

“Silly child.” Madam Yan chuckled lightly, “As long as all of you children are safe and sound, your father and I will be at ease. Besides, an ordinary life is a blessing. What do you think, Old Master?”

Yan Xiaojing nodded, “After Su’er returns, ask him for his opinion. He has to think about his wife, so I wonder what plans he has.”

Cultivation was a lifelong matter, and Yan Ge couldn’t force them. After chatting with his parents for a while, he left for the palace.

A month later, Cao Zhan returned to the court.

Yan Su accepted the Foundation Building Pill and embarked on the path of cultivation together with Yan Xiangtian.

During the victory banquet, Huangfu Yuchen announced the abolition of the current empress and the appointment of Yan Ge as the empress.

Yan Ge didn’t bother with other people’s reactions, waiting for the system’s response.

–“Ding. Congratulations, you have successfully completed the main mission 12—being promoted to Empress by the Emperor. Mission rewards: 10,000,000 silver, ‘Fengyun Immortal Records’ cultivation method until the end of the Crossing Tribulation stage. The system’s final upgrade… 96%, 97%… 100%.”

Yan Jin’s voice rang out in Yan Ge’s mind, “Master, the ‘Male Consort Upgrade System’ upgrade is complete, and the space has evolved into a small world.”

“Fantastic!” Yan Ge eagerly opened the system panel and indeed, the system’s inventory had evolved into a three-dimensional space. Through the panel, he could clearly see the mountains, rivers, and occasional little animals inside. It was like a small world.

At this moment, he noticed an icon in the corner that he hadn’t seen before. Curious, he clicked on it, and the prompt read: “Do you want to unbind from the system?”

He paused for a moment, ”Little Jin, what’s this?”

Yan Jin explained, “My mission is already complete. Unbinding from me means I’ll become an independent entity and return to the Origin Realm. But the system will still belong to you, Master.”

“The Origin Realm?” Yan Ge didn’t understand.

Yan Jin continued, “It’s the space where all system entities exist.”

Yan Ge understood and chose to unbind without hesitation.

Yan Jin was both surprised and touched, “Master.”

“Silly. To me, you’re not just a system but also family.” Yan Ge smiled as he looked at the young man sitting with Jiang Gan.

“Thank you, Master.” Yan Jin replied with a bright smile.

A month later, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen completed all their work handovers. Huangfu Yunxi ascended the throne.

A few days later, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen bid farewell to their relatives and friends with Yan Jin in tow, and rode horses out of the capital.

In a remote place, Yan Jin left them and returned to the Origin Realm. Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen opened a spatial passage, leaving this world to start a new life.

– Volume Four Completed –

Ahh! Volume Four is complete, and we can now go to the final one: Return To The Modern World.

MCUS Chapter 211

August 2014, a marketplace on Earth.

In the bustling city, cars came and went. The clear sky was suddenly covered with dark clouds, the sun disappeared in an instant, strong winds surged, and the dark clouds rolled and churned, turning broad daylight into night in the blink of an eye. Trees in the green belt swayed wildly in the wind, almost uprooting themselves. Beautiful women wearing flowing dresses on the sidewalk exclaimed in surprise, holding down skirts that were nearly lifted by the wind and running into nearby cafés. Sunshades meant for shade were carried away by the wind, falling onto the road and rolling out of sight. Newspapers and magazines in the newsstands rustled loudly, and in the blink of an eye, they filled the sky.

“It’s strange, the weather forecast clearly said there wouldn’t be any rain this week, and this weather changed so quickly.” The owner of a clothing store muttered as she moved her store’s mannequins inside.

At the ice cream shop, handsome men and beautiful women in line for ice cream to beat the heat quickly left, hurrying back home.

“Boom—” a sound resembling a thunderclap resounded in the sky, accompanied by a dazzling burst of white light descending from above.

Pedestrians on the street closed their eyes in discomfort.

Unnoticed by anyone, a crack appeared in the now dark sky, as if a huge gap had been torn open, and two figures, one black and one white, stepped out as if walking on level ground.

These two individuals wore modern clothing, and both were young and handsome, exuding an unparalleled noble aura. They looked like a perfect

match.

The smiling young man glanced downward with shrews eyes, his face showing joy. He then turned to the man beside him, “Yuchen, we’re not in the wrong place. This is Earth.”

The man’s lips curved, affection evident in his eyes that could melt anyone, “It’s an interesting place indeed. Baby, you better take good care of me in your territory.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t sell you. I can’t bear to.” The young man laughed heartily, playfully kissing the man’s lips.

These two were none other than Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, who had left the Qingchuan Continent to embark on a journey through time and space.

“Let’s go down quickly. Follow me.” Yan Ge held Huangfu Yuchen’s hand. He was genuinely worried about losing him, not because he feared not finding him, but because he was concerned about him facing difficulties in an unfamiliar place.

The two figures flashed by and disappeared.

Meanwhile, the dark clouds dispersed, and the scorching sun radiated its brilliant light, restoring calm to the world, as if the peculiar weather before had been a mere illusion.

The shop owners who had turned off their air conditioners due to the cold muttered as they turned them back on.

“This weather is really strange.”

The “culprits” Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had stealthily blended into the crowd. Yan Ge had already bought modern-style clothing for both of them from the system’s store, so he was not worried about being out of place.

“We don’t have the local currency here, we need to sell some gold, silver, and jewelry.” Yan Ge said to Huangfu Yuchen. He had complete control over the system now and had already confessed everything about it to

Yuchen. While they could shop in the system store, the best way for Yuchen to quickly adapt to modern life was to experience it firsthand.

“I’ll listen to you.” Huangfu Yuchen found it novel and enjoyable to depend entirely on his beloved for such matters.

Passersby looked at the two intertwined hands with strange eyes, but Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen paid them no mind, walking forward calmly. Occasionally, they heard a comment like “such a perfect match,” and both of their lips curled upwards.

Yan Ge wasn’t clear about the city they were in at the moment. They had to follow the street and search for a store that dealt in jade. Their luck was good, and they soon found one. They could tell from the glass walls that the store wasn’t small.

A graceful and attractive female clerk with a sweet smile on her face approached, discreetly assessing these two customers who were anything but ordinary based on their aura. She had a hunch that she was going to be lucky today.

“Welcome. What can I help you gentlemen with?”

“We have a piece of jade to sell. Would you be interested?” Yan Ge inquired.

The female clerk felt puzzled, could these two be fallen nobles? But she didn’t show it on her face, maintaining her polite demeanor. “We do purchase items. Please wait a moment; I’ll bring our appraiser over.”

The piece of jade Yan Ge presented wasn’t ordinary, and the appraiser recognized its value. They offered 5 million as a price.

The price could have been negotiated higher, but Yan Ge wasn’t particularly concerned about material possessions now. He nodded readily. Since they didn’t have identification or a bank card, the manager gave them 200,000 in cash, and the rest was transferred to a temporary card which they could withdraw later.

Yan Ge expressed gratitude and generously left a tip for the female clerk from a stack of bills before walking away with Huangfu Yuchen and a bag full of cash.

Both the female clerk and the manager stared, amazed that these two were carrying so much cash without fear of being robbed.

After leaving the jade shop, Yan Ge pulled out a bill and introduced it to Huangfu Yuchen.

It had to be said that the worries of the female clerk and the manager were somewhat valid. The two of them were being followed by three men and one woman, none of whom were upstanding individuals. The leader was called Brother Ma.

Today, Brother Ma had brought his two underlings to the jade shop to pick out a birthday gift for his girl. Coincidentally, he saw Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen coming to sell jade. At first, Brother Ma didn't pay much attention, but when he saw Huangfu Yuchen come out of the VIP room carrying a bag filled with something, he immediately guessed they were carrying cash. Brother Ma got excited, signaling the other three with his eyes to follow them.

Brother Ma and his two underlings were confident in their skills. The girl wasn't someone to be trifled with in a fight either.

The plan was well-made. When they reached a secluded alley, the girl was responsible for grabbing the bag and running away, while the other three were responsible for dealing with Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

Unexpectedly, the girl tried to run after grabbing the bag, but she found herself unable to move it, as if it weighed a thousand pounds.

And the other three received a swift kick from Yan Ge before they could even touch his clothes and were unable to get up for a while.

The girl turned pale with fright. She quickly released the bag's handle, her back against the wall, torn between wanting to flee and fearing to.

Brother Ma immediately realized they had bitten off more than they could chew and nervously stepped back. “What, what do you want?”

Yan Ge secretly extended his hand, preparing to pull out Brother Ma’s belt to tie the four of them together.

Huangfu Yuchen furrowed his brow and held Yan Ge’s hand. “Baby, don’t dirty your hands.”

Unable to find anything else to use as a makeshift restraint, Yan Ge abandoned the idea. “Consider yourselves lucky. Get lost!”

The four people got up and fled.

“Tsk tsk, with skills like these, you might as well participate in a short-distance race and maybe win a championship.” Yan Ge rubbed his chin. “Let’s not bother about them, let’s go.”

Traveling in China required proper identification. Yan Ge took Huangfu Yuchen to the household registration office and used not-so-honorable methods (controlled them) to make the officials issue them identification cards.

Next, they went to buy phones. It was then that Yan Ge found out it was August 2014, just over two years since he had crossed over. They were in Shangshi, which was located in the central part of China. Even if they took the highway, it would still take them eight to nine hours to reach the capital

Since they were already back on Earth, Yan Ge decided to take it easy. He got a few bank cards, bought a laptop, a few sets of clothes, and some miscellaneous items. Carrying their modest luggage, they set off on the journey back to the capital.

Following the principle of letting Huangfu Yuchen experience the new life, they bought high-speed train tickets. The train compartment was spacious and comfortable.

Huangfu Yuchen sat beside Yan Ge, playing with his phone with great interest. He particularly liked the camera function and constantly took pictures of Yan Ge.

Yan Ge watched him with a smile, allowing him to continue.

Seated across from them were two girls who occasionally cast complex glances at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. They found the two young men on the other side quite handsome but regretted that good looks were wasted on one of them, looking like he came from some backwater. Otherwise, why would he play the photo-taking game for an hour or two without stopping? The other handsome guy seemed quite indulgent towards him too, changing the battery for his phone once it died.

“Is it fun?” Yan Ge asked Huangfu Yuchen with a smile. He knew they were being watched but didn’t mind.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, “Teach me how to play this game.” He was referring to a gem-matching game.

“Okay.” Yan Ge leaned closer. “Tap here to transform and change direction like this.”

Huangfu Yuchen took it a step further and pulled Yan Ge into his arms, letting him rest against his chest.

The intimate posture excited the two girls across from them. They exchanged glances, stealing occasional glances at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. Their eyes were full of excitement, although they weren’t exactly sure what they were excited about.

“First play some rounds, show me how it’s done.” Huangfu Yuchen requested.

With his breath tickling his ear, Yan Ge leaned closer to his chest and rubbed against it. “Okay, watch.”

Yan Ge hadn’t played games for a long time. Soon, he became engrossed. When he reached the third level, he failed twice in a row. His competitiveness was ignited, so he shifted his position in Huangfu Yuchen’s embrace and continued to fight.

A faint smile curved at the corners of Huangfu Yuchen’s lips. He could tell that Yan Ge was somewhat unsettled, perhaps due to the unfamiliar environment. Thus, he used this method to distract his attention, and it seemed to be working quite well.

“Ah, I lost again.” Yan Ge turned his head in speechlessness.

Huangfu Yuchen’s palm cradled his head, and he planted a kiss on his forehead. “Let me try.”

A middle-aged man diagonally across from them stared at them, his face displaying a mix of disdain and contempt.

Huangfu Yuchen casually looked up and locked his icy gaze onto the man.

The middle-aged man was taken aback, feeling as if he was enveloped in a cold breeze. His hands and feet turned cold, and he quickly averted his gaze.

The two girls across from them grew even more excited. One leaned in toward the other’s ear and whispered in a hushed voice, “Such a domineering gong!”

The other girl nodded repeatedly.

The corner of Yan Ge’s mouth twitched.

Huangfu Yuchen’s gaze returned to the phone screen, his fingers tapping swiftly.

“Congratulations, you’ve cleared the level!”

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A few hours later, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen walked out of the station with the crowd.

Yan Ge grew up in the capital city and later started his own company, often traveling around. This made him incredibly familiar with every place in the capital. But standing outside the train station now, he suddenly felt a bit lost.

“Yuchen, you also know that when I crossed over, my soul occupied another Yan Ge’s body. I don’t know whether the me here is dead or not… How about we find a hotel first?”

Huangfu Yuchen understood the principle of facing difficulties head-on rather than avoiding them. He held Yan Ge’s waist and said, “Baby, why not make a call back, tell them you’re Yan Ge, and see how your family reacts.”

Yan Ge’s eyes brightened, “That’s a good idea. Why didn’t I think of that?”

Huangfu Yuchen smirked, “Phones are useful.”

Yan Ge raised an eyebrow, “What are you proud of? I taught you everything you know.”

“Have you not heard the saying ‘the student surpasses the master’?” Huangfu Yuchen chuckled. “Let’s find a place to sit first.”

Yan Ge remembered, “There’s a café across the street.”

At the café, they ordered drinks.

Yan Ge dialed the number to the Yan family mansion and after a couple of rings, someone answered, “Hello, this is the Yan residence.”

Yan Ge recognized it was Auntie Wu’s voice, “Auntie Wu, it’s Yan Ge.”

“Second, Second Young Master?”

Yan Ge raised an eyebrow. Could he have really died back then? Well, his soul had crossed over, so naturally, his original body would be deceased.

To his surprise, Auntie Wu continued, “Second Young Master? Are you okay? Where have you been? Why haven’t you come home for so long?”

“Huh?” Yan Ge’s mind worked quickly. “The situation here is quite complicated. I’ll be back in a few days. Are my parents at home?”

“They’re not.”

“I see, I’ll call them later.”

Yan Ge hung up the call, feeling a bit befuddled.

Huangfu Yuchen had also heard the conversation on both ends and sent a voice transmission, “Based on what the other side said, it seems that the original you didn’t die but went missing.”

“Yeah.” Yan Ge took out his notebook, “I’ll look up the news from that time to see if I can find any clues.”

After entering the time, location, and a few keywords, he quickly found the news from that time. It turned out that after he fainted, the Yan family quickly sent him to the hospital. However, on the same day, the floor where his hospital room was located caught fire. Thankfully, it was discovered in time, and there were no casualties. The only strange thing was that the Second Young Master of the Yan family had gone missing. The police had thoroughly investigated the matter, but due to the chaotic circumstances of that day, the investigation made no progress.

After some thought, Yan Ge dialed Yan Jiaqiang’s phone.

“Hello, Yan Jiaqiang speaking.”

“Dad, it’s Yan Ge.” Hearing his father’s voice again, Yan Ge felt a surge of excitement.

Yan Jiaqiang’s tone was flat, “Hmm, Auntie Wu called me just now. Since you’re okay, why didn’t you come back home earlier? Anyway, I’m busy here. We’ll talk after you’re back.”

Yan Ge hadn’t even managed to say a second sentence before the call was disconnected.

He sneered and abandoned the idea of calling his mother. Sometimes, he really doubted whether he was truly Yan Jiaqiang and Du Rulan’s biological son.

“Baby, you have me.” Huangfu Yuchen didn’t like that expression on him. He picked up Yan Ge’s hand and placed it on his leg, holding it there. “You also have Yan Xiaojing, Madam Yan, Yan Su, Yan Xiangtian.”

Yan Ge nodded with relief, “Yes, I have you. We’ll go live our own lives after seeing them. There are many fun things in this world, and I’ll show you everything. After we’ve had our fill of fun, we can leave this place and travel to other places.”

Huangfu Yuchen smiled, “Okay, I’ll follow your lead. I rely on you for everything.”

The two settled their bill and left, finding a hotel to stay in.

From the moment they left the café until they settled into the hotel, almost an hour had passed, and Yan Ge’s phone hadn’t rung.

Huangfu Yuchen’s eyebrows furrowed tightly. Yan Ge suddenly looked over and he eased his expression. He released his grip and a hint of coldness flickered deep within his eyes. Auntie Wu was merely a servant; it would be impossible for her to hide such a major event like Yan Ge’s return. Yet, no

one had called to greet him. He could well imagine the cold treatment his beloved had received in the Yan family.

Yan Ge checked his watch, “Yuchen, it’s almost six. Let’s go downstairs and have dinner first. How about having Western cuisine?”

“Alright.”

Huangfu Yuchen was adept at imitation, and Yan Ge’s plan to witness a laughable moment was foiled.

Back at the hotel, Huangfu Yuchen “taught” his beloved in his own way, and the two didn’t rest until it was almost dawn.

Having already decided to face the Yan family, Yan Ge no longer procrastinated. The next day, he brought Huangfu Yuchen to the Yan family residence. They intended to reclaim his properties as soon as possible, so they could lead their own peaceful life.

Before heading back, Yan Ge also made a phone call to inform the family.

At this point, it’s worth mentioning who’s currently in the Yan family. Yan Hengyuan and Yan Hengzheng were two brothers, and the two elders of the Yan family. Yan Hengyuan was the previous head of the family. He had two sons and one daughter: the eldest son Yan Jiaqiang, the second son Yan Jiagang, and the youngest daughter Yan Yunyun. A few years ago, Yan Hengyuan passed on the family head position to Yan Jiaqiang and became less involved in family affairs. Yan Jiaqiang married Du Rulan and had three sons: Yan Weifeng, Yan Ge, and Yan Yan.

Yan Jiagang’s wife was Zhang Xiufen, and they had a son and a daughter, Yan Mingrui and Yan Xiaoxiao. Yan Yunyun, the daughter, married into the Liu family in the capital city. Since married daughters are like spilled water, there’s no need to mention them further.

Yan Hengzheng, on the other hand, had only two children: his daughter Yan Ningxiang, who was married, and his son Yan Jiajie. Yan Jiajie’s wife was Zhao Meimei, and the couple had a son named Yan Jingtao. Among the

younger generation, Yan Weifeng, Yan Mingrui, and Yan Jingtao were already married with children. So, altogether, the Yan family was quite large.

When Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen arrived, the Yan family's living room was nearly filled.

Several pairs of eyes shot their gazes over. Yan Ge's footsteps paused, and he confidently walked alongside Huangfu Yu Chen.

Yan Xiaoxiao's eyes swept over Huangfu Yu Chen, and she secretly praised. She had always thought that her cousin was already quite the catch, but she hadn't expected this man to be several levels above him in terms of looks and temperament.

Yan Jiaqiang and Du Rulan scrutinized Yan Ge, confirming that he was their son. However, Yan Ge's demeanor had changed quite a bit compared to before, which left them somewhat surprised.

"Grandfather, Second Uncle, Dad, Mom." Yan Ge put down the gifts and greeted the two eldest family members, as well as his parents, before extending the greetings to several other elders.

"Yan Ge, where have you been these past two years?" Yan Jiaqiang furrowed his brows and spoke first. "If you were fine, why didn't you contact the family?"

Yan Ge said, "Dad, it wasn't intentional. I lost my memory and only regained it a few days ago. As soon as I did, I immediately called home."

"Lost your memory?" Yan Jiaqiang found it hard to believe.

Yan Ge didn't mind; he and Huangfu Yuchen were like they had appeared out of thin air. Even if Yan Jiaqiang investigated, he wouldn't be able to find anything.

"Who is this gentleman?" Du Rulan had noticed Huangfu Yuchen long ago. Just based on his aura, it was clear that he wasn't an ordinary person.

Yan Ge said, “His name is Huangfu Yuchen, my beloved.”

A charming curve formed at the corner of Huangfu Yuchen’s lips.

“Mr. Yan, Mrs. Yan, pleased to meet you.”

The Yan family exploded.

“What?”

“Second Cousin is actually gay?”

“What did you say? Beloved?” Yan Jiaqiang’s anger surged, his face turning pale.

Yan Ge smiled faintly, “Yes.”

“Yan Ge! What are you talking about?” Du Rulan nervously glanced at the others, glaring at Yan Ge.

Yan Yan looked at Yan Ge with glee.

Yan Ge lowered his gaze, then looked up again, “Dad, Mom, a lot has happened to me over the past two years. Why haven’t you asked me anything?”

Both Yan Jiaqiang and Du Rulan were taken aback.

Yan Jiaqiang quickly regained his composure and grew angry, “No matter what happened to you, you shouldn’t be associating with another man!” He even suspected that his second son had done this deliberately, intentionally revealing such a shameful matter in front of so many people just to make others laugh at him.

“Yan Ge, make him leave immediately. Our Yan family doesn’t welcome him!” Du Rulan’s cheeks were flushed with anger, pointing at Huangfu Yuchen.

Yan Ge held Huangfu Yuchen's hand, "You are my parents, and I respect you. That's why I brought him here for you to meet. Since you don't welcome him, we'll leave."

With that, he pulled Huangfu Yuchen and left without looking back. He decided to let go of the properties and companies he had planned to reclaim.

"You, you wretch! If you dare to step out that threshold, don't bother coming back to me!" Yan Jiaqiang couldn't contain his anger, picking up the ashtray from the coffee table and hurling it at Yan Ge.

Huangfu Yuchen raised his hand and caught the ashtray before it hit Yan Ge's back. He turned around and looked calmly at Yan Jiaqiang.

"Yuchen, let's go," Yan Ge spoke as if he was unaware of what had happened behind him.

Huangfu Yuchen raised his hand, and the ashtray flew back smoothly. It landed on the coffee table with a soft "thud," without slipping even a bit.

Everyone was startled, staring at the ashtray in disbelief. It was made of glass!

"Yan Ge!" Yan Weifeng called out, patting Yan Jiaqiang's shoulder, "Dad, Mom, don't get too upset. I'll go talk to Yan Ge."

Yan Yan's eyes gleamed mischievously, then he followed suit.

Before Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen could hail a taxi, Yan Weifeng and Yan Yan caught up to them.

"Yan Ge."

Yan Ge halted, "Big brother, is something the matter?"

Yan Weifeng glanced at Huangfu Yuchen, "Let's talk in private. I'm your big brother, so I have the right, don't I?"

Yan Ge smiled and shook his head, “Anything involving me concerns Yuchen as well.”

Yan Weifeng furrowed his brows.

“Second brother, I support you!” Yan Yan tilted his head and grinned at Yan Ge, then playfully winked at Huangfu Yuchen. However, Huangfu Yuchen didn’t even glance in his direction, causing Yan Yan to scrunch up his nose.

“Alright, today is chaotic. I’m afraid we don’t have time now. What’s your phone number? Let’s schedule a time to talk.” Yan Weifeng said.

Yan Ge provided him with his phone number.

“Oh, by the way, big brother, who’s taking care of my properties and the company now?”

Yan Weifeng explained, “When you initially disappeared, a missing person’s report was filed. Your properties are still in your name, and Jingtao has been overseeing your company.”

“I understand. We’re leaving.”

“Wait.” Yan Weifeng called out to Yan Ge, but he didn’t know what to say. He wasn’t sure what had happened to his younger brother, but he was finding it increasingly difficult to understand him.

“Actually, even if you want to be with Mr. Huangfu, you could gradually explain it to Mom and Dad. They might find it easier to accept,” Yan Weifeng’s tone held a touch of reproach.

“It won’t work.”

Yan Ge’s confident tone left Yan Weifeng momentarily speechless. He subconsciously asked, “Why?”

Yan Ge smiled faintly, “Big brother, apart from providing me with basic necessities, when have you ever heard Mom and Dad proactively care about me? They haven’t even shown concern for me once. How could they

possibly accept me being with Yuchen? In that case, it’s better to be straightforward.”

Yan Weifeng was at a loss for words.

Yan Ge nodded at Yan Weifeng, then got into the taxi with Huangfu Yuchen.

Yan Weifeng stood still for a moment, speechless.

Yan Yan leaned against Yan Weifeng’s shoulder, “Big brother, what do you think about that man named Huangfu Yuchen? In my opinion, his background is definitely extraordinary.”

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Yan Weifeng said calmly, “Let’s talk inside first.”

As they reached the entrance, Yan Jiaqiang and Du Rulan were seeing off the guests. Yan Jiangang and others expressed consoling words to Yan Jiaqiang and Du Rulan on the surface, but their eyes held a malicious glee. To think that Yan Jiaqiang’s second son was actually gay – that was a huge scandal, enough for them to gossip about for days.

Yan Jiaqiang and Du Rulan could easily guess their thoughts, which made them even more infuriated with Yan Ge. They suppressed their displeasure and saw the guests off.

The living room was left with Yan Hengyuan, Yan Jiaqiang, Du Rulan, Yan Weifeng, and Yan Yan. Yan Weifeng’s wife, Zhang Qiaoqiao, had taken her four-year-old son, Yan Si, to the second floor once she heard that Yan Ge was gay.

The servants had been dismissed by Du Rulan, otherwise Yan Jiaqiang and Du Rulan would be even more exasperated.

The senior members of the family remained silent, and Yan Weifeng also maintained his composure.

Yan Yan lounged on the sofa, amusing himself with a small cat he had raised.

“That prodigal son!” Yan Jiaqiang sat down heavily on the sofa. “He dared to come back even after being involved with a man! Why did he come back?”

Du Rulan kept rubbing her chest, her brows furrowed together.

Yan Hengyuan took a sip of tea. “I think this is partly your fault. Have you ever cared about him from childhood to now? Do you even know what kind of person he is?”

Du Rulan turned her head. “Father, what do you mean we didn’t care about him? Did we deprive him of food or drink? Look how he’s repaying us.”

Yan Jiaqiang was momentarily taken aback by Yan Hengyuan’s counter-question. After a pause, he said, “Father, does it matter now? Just watch, within a day, Jiagang will spread this matter. He thinks I didn’t know he’s been coveting my position!”

Yan Hengyuan remained composed. “Rest assured, if he does that, it will be like harming himself a thousand times to harm the enemy once.”

Yan Jiaqiang thought about it and realized it was true. He felt a bit relieved. “But I won’t agree to Yan Ge’s matter!”

Suddenly, Du Rulan remembered something. Her eyes brightened, and her chest stopped hurting. She chimed in, “Of course, we can’t agree! Our Yan family’s company has encountered some issues recently and we were considering collaborating with the Zou family. Since Yan Ge has come back, it’s a perfect opportunity. If he marries the Zou family’s young lady…”

Yan Jiaqiang’s mind raced: it did seem like a good idea.

Du Rulan didn’t notice his expression. “I get angry just thinking about it. If he had successfully married Luyanyan back then, our Yan family wouldn’t have ended up like this. Thankfully, he’s back now. Marrying him to the Zou family’s daughter would be a win-win situation. It would separate him and that man while helping our Yan family.”

“Weifeng, what do you think?” Yan Jiaqiang looked at his eldest son who had been silent.

Yan Weifeng, “Dad, we should first investigate that man around Second Brother. He doesn’t seem like an ordinary person.”

Only now did Yan Hengyuan speak again. “Weifeng has a thoughtful point.” He glanced at Yan Jiaqiang. As he aged and relinquished power, he didn’t want to get involved in such matters, but he would still offer some advice when the timing was right.

Yan Jiaqiang had calmed down by this point. “Yes, I neglected that. Weifeng, I’ll entrust this matter to you. You must find out what’s going on between Yan Ge and that guy surnamed Huangfu.”

“I understand, Dad.” Yan Weifeng agreed.

Yan Yan walked to Du Rulan’s side, hugging her arm. “Mom, I’m hungry.”

Du Rulan patted his arm, scolding gently, “Always thinking about food.” Despite her words, there was no hint of displeasure on her face. Instead, her eyes held a smile. She then instructed the servants to prepare the meal.

Yan Hengyuan stood up. “Alright, I’ll return to the villa now.” The villa he referred to was Emerald Villa, a green dining establishment under the Yan family’s name. As he aged, he nurtured himself in the villa.

“Father, stay for dinner first.” Yan Jiaqiang tried to persuade.

“Yes, Father,” Du Rulan added.

Yan Yan grabbed Yan Hengyuan’s arm, shaking it lightly. “Grandpa, stay a few more days before leaving. I don’t want you to go.”

“No need. Alright, be mindful of your words and actions. What kind of image does it give for a grown man to act so spoiled!” Yan Hengyuan looked at him with a faint smile.

Yan Yan retracted his hand awkwardly, forcing a smile. “Understood, Grandpa.”

Yan Hengyuan’s tone changed when he spoke to Yan Weifeng, a kind expression in his eyes. “Weifeng, if you have time, take Little Si to the villa for a few days.”

“Yes, Grandpa. I’ll bring him to visit you this Friday. Take care on your way.” Yan Weifeng respectfully agreed.

Yan Hengyuan nodded. “Alright, I’m leaving. No need to see me off.”

As the main door closed, Yan Yan angrily flopped onto the sofa. That old man’s tone was as unpleasant as ever. He knew the old man didn’t like him, so there was no need to approach him.

Du Rulan also felt dissatisfied, complaining to Yan Jiaqiang, “Sometimes Father’s words are too harsh. Look how he spoke about our Yan Yan. What’s wrong with our Yan Yan being close to him?”

Yan Jiaqiang furrowed his brows. “Alright, it’s just a few words from an elder to a junior. What’s the big deal? I have work at the company. I’m going back.”

“What’s so urgent at work? Can’t you leave after having dinner? Be careful while driving.” Du Rulan watched as he headed toward the door and had no choice but to grab his briefcase and remind him.

“I know.”

Yan Jiaqiang’s patience seemed to wear thin, but Du Rulan didn’t notice.

After Yan Ge and Huangfu Yu Chen left the Yan residence, they went house-hunting. In order to let Huangfu Yuchen experience modern life, they decided to stay in this time period for a few years at least. Having a place of their own was necessary. Additionally, as their cultivation grew stronger, progressing took more time. There was no rush to leave in the short term.

They chose a semi-mountain villa with picturesque scenery. It was serene and pleasant, though the air wasn’t as fresh as in ancient times. Yan Ge used a few spiritual stones to arrange a simple gathering array, upgrading the villa from basic to upscale. The air became fresher, and even the flowers and plants in the villa flourished under the nourishing spiritual energy, becoming exceptionally vibrant. There were other residents on the

mountain, but they were far enough away that there was no need to worry about anyone noticing anything unusual here.

Afterward, they spent two days buying furniture and vehicles before finally settling down. Regarding their cars, both of them unconsciously chose more imposing SUVs: a blue one and a black one. Since Huangfu Yu Chen didn't have a driver's license yet, Yan Ge planned to teach him personally. He also intended to ask a friend for help arranging a driving test as soon as possible.

A house only felt like home when it smelled of food, so they decided to cook a meal to celebrate setting up their new home.

"Baby, I think at least one of us should learn some cooking skills." Huangfu Yuchen looked at Yan Ge, who appeared completely composed but when he put the fish into the pan, a burnt smell wafted out immediately. Hastily, he added a bowl of water into the pan, producing a "pff" sound. It seemed the burnt smell only intensified.

"Look at you, causing trouble." Yan Ge remarked. "We still had a chance to salvage it."

"Really?" Huangfu Yuchen looked at the pan skeptically. Could it be saved when it had turned black from being burnt? Wasn't this just bullying him because he was from ancient times.

Yan Ge changed the subject. "Didn't you say you are very talented? Okay, you learn how to cook."

"Okay."

'He agreed so readily?' Yan Ge raised an eyebrow. "Are you serious?"

"Absolutely."

Yan Ge felt quite pleased. Taking off his apron, he said, "Good. I'll sign you up for cooking classes now."

Huangfu Yuchen sat on the armrest of the computer chair, watching. He took out a small pastry from his storage ring and fed it to Yan Ge.

At that moment, Yan Ge's phone rang.

"Can you answer it for me?" Yan Ge's attention was on the computer screen.

Huangfu Yuchen picked up the call and activated the speaker. "Who's this?"

"Um… hello, I'm Yan Ge's old friend, Xu Kai. You must be Yan Ge's boyfriend, right?"

'Boyfriend?' Huangfu Yu Chen's lips curved. "Yes, nice to meet you. I'm Huangfu Yuchen."

"Mr. Huangfu, I've heard a lot about you. A few of us old friends heard that Yan Ge is back and thought about inviting him for dinner. We're not sure when he's free."

Yan Ge was focused on the webpage, saying, "Little Xu Kai, I'm available tomorrow. I'll treat you guys. Could I trouble you to inform them, I've lost their phone numbers."

"Yan Ge! How many times do I have to tell you not to call me Little Xu Kai!" Xu Kai was jumping on the side. "Since you're treating us, we're going to bring our families along." The implicit meaning behind his words was obvious.

Yan Ge chuckled. "Same here, I'm bringing my family too."

Huangfu Yuchen nodded in satisfaction. The word "family" was worthy of praise.

"That sounds about right. What time and place?"

Yan Ge thought for a moment. "Emerald Villa, tomorrow night at 7 o'clock."

"OK. See you tomorrow."

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Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen arrived five minutes early at Jade Emerald Villa. They walked up to the designated private room, pushed the door open, and after a momentary pause, smiled.

“Sorry, we’re late.”

Everyone inside the room stood up, some reassuring Yan Ge that it was fine, while others appraised Huangfu Yuchen.

A tall, thin man walked up to Yan Ge and playfully punched his shoulder. “You rascal, we got here early. Won’t you introduce us?”

Yan Ge generously put his arm around Huangfu Yuchen’s waist. “This is my partner, Huangfu Yuchen. You can just call him Huangfu. Yuchen, let me introduce you: this is my old classmate, Xu Kai. We’ve been classmates from high school to university. This is his wife, Wu Qian. Wherever they go, they’re the model couple. And this is Yang Fan, I’ve known him for about four or five years. This is He Xin, an old friend. And this gorgeous lady is Lu Hanya.”

“Nice to meet you.” Huangfu Yuchen adapted to the situation, shaking hands with each of them.

Yang Fan, He Xin, and Lu Hanya’s partners were strangers to Yan Ge, so the three introduced their family members themselves. Now, everyone in the room knew each other.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were the only male couple, creating a somewhat awkward atmosphere. Even Xu Kai, who seemed the most outgoing, couldn’t help but secretly scrutinize Huangfu Yuchen. In terms of appearance and temperament, Huangfu Yuchen was certainly worthy of Yan

Ge, but they had little exposure to same-sex couples, making the situation a bit awkward.

Huangfu Yuchen suggested, “Shall we sit down and chat?”

“Yes.” Yan Ge led Huangfu Yuchen to their seats. “Have you all placed your orders?”

Others also took their seats.

Xu Kai chuckled, “If Boss Yan didn’t show up, who would dare to order?”

“Exactly,” Lu Hanya smiled sweetly, “Boss Yan, are we free to order anything today?”

“Of course,” Yan Ge responded, “Order whatever you like. If I don’t have enough money, I can always stay and wash dishes.”

Laughter filled the room, and the atmosphere finally became more relaxed.

Huangfu Yuchen added, “No need to order drinks for now. I brought a jar of wine that’s both sweet and not too intoxicating. I think everyone will enjoy it. The lovely ladies can also have a taste. It’s refreshing and good for the skin.”

No wonder there was a faint smell of wine earlier. Everyone’s gaze shifted to the bag in Huangfu Yuchen’s hands, watching him take out a rustic wine jar. Everyone was curious. Such wine jars were usually seen in period dramas. Could this wine really have some extraordinary qualities?

Yan Ge explained, “Don’t underestimate this wine. It’s brewed using Yuchen’s family’s ancient method. I won’t say much, you’ll know once you taste it.”

The mention of ancient brewing techniques heightened their interest. They believed that this man wouldn’t bring something poorly made to his partner’s friends’ gathering. If it didn’t deliver, wouldn’t that be embarrassing?

With orders placed, the conversation continued.

Knowing Yan Ge's friends had a lot to say to him, Huangfu Yuchen stood up. "Excuse me for a moment, I'll use the restroom."

"Turn left after you exit," Jade Emerald Villa was the Yan family's property, so he was familiar with the layout.

"I won't get lost," Huangfu Yuchen patted Yan Ge's head, then opened the door and left.

Xu Kai, He Xin, Yang Fan, and Lu Hanya immediately gathered around Yan Ge.

"Yan Ge, where have you been all this time?" Xu Kai couldn't wait to ask.

He Xin added, "Yeah, when we heard you went missing, we searched everywhere but couldn't find any news."

Yan Ge explained, "I was kidnapped and then had an accident that caused memory loss. I don't remember anything."

Yang Fan was surprised, "You're the second young master of the prestigious Yan family. Who would dare to kidnap you?"

"Not sure. I was drugged, woke up alone in the deep mountains. That's where I met Yuchen." Yan Ge changed the topic, "Enough about that. It's all emotional. By the way, I haven't congratulated He Xin and Yang Fan on their recent wedding. This is a belated gift from Yuchen and me. It's just a small gesture." He took out two identical brocade boxes from his bag.

"What wedding? We've been married for years, no need to be so formal," He Xin declined.

He Xin's wife, Long Miaomiao, was an easygoing woman a she said with a smile, "No need for a wedding gift. Our daughter turns one next month. Yan Ge, you better prepare a birthday gift in advance."

Yan Ge smiled, “The little princess is almost one year old? Congratulations! I’ll definitely prepare another gift then.”

Yang Fan accepted the gift and handed it to his wife, Lu Xin. “Keep it. Yan Ge’s gift must be something good. Don’t refuse.”

Lu Xin playfully scolded him, “You have such thick skin.”

Yang Fan grinned, “We’ll give them a gift when they have their wedding feast, won’t we?”

Yan Ge chuckled, “Perhaps that day will come soon.”

“Ah,” Lu Hanya playfully slapped Yan Ge’s shoulder, “Are you serious? I never heard you say you liked men before. Didn’t you used to date women?”

“Really,” Yan Ge admitted candidly, “I’ve always been attracted to men. But before, I was either busy studying or working, never had time for dating. So, naturally, I didn’t randomly tell you all I liked men. But he’s great.”

The two words “He’s great” held many implications. Xu Kai and the others understood and didn’t pry further, shifting to lighter topics. They teased Lu Hanya and her somewhat shy boyfriend and chatted while waiting for the food to arrive.

Huangfu Yuchen timed his return well, sitting down just as the dishes were being served.

He placed the wine jar on a tray and smoothly peeled off the clay covering the opening, not spilling a single speck. This skill impressed Xu Kai and the others. Opening the wine jar released an inviting aroma, stimulating their senses. The fragrance invaded their nostrils, awakening their spirits. The scent effortlessly stirred everyone’s appetites.

“Excellent wine!” Xu Kai sincerely praised.

Little did they know, the fragrance had stirred up a commotion among the guests in the hall outside the private room. The aroma lingered, even enticing some non-drinking female patrons to inquire about the wine from the staff.

The staff felt helpless; this wasn't the villa's wine. How were they supposed to explain?

Inside the private room, Huangfu Yuchen poured wine for everyone with expert precision.

Yan Ge watched him secretly, musing how lucky his friends were. Having an emperor personally serve them was quite an honor. But he, as the emperor's man, was even luckier.

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at him with a smile and continued pouring the wine.

As everyone knew, wine jara had wide openings and were prone to spills while pouring. Yet, Huangfu Yuchen managed to pour wine into each glass accurately, without a single drop wasted. Xu Kai and the others were genuinely impressed.

"Give it a try," Yan Ge eagerly took a sip.

Yang Fan took a sip but didn't immediately swallow. He savored the taste before letting the liquid glide down his throat. "Rich, smooth, and fragrant, wonderful wine!"

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Yan Jiaqiang entered with a somber expression, his smile fading upon seeing Yan Ge by the table.

"Yan Ge, what are you doing here?"

"Dad." Yan Ge walked over, smiling faintly, his demeanor calm. "I'm treating my friends to a meal. Do you need something?"

Yan Jiaqiang was about to flare up but remembered his main purpose for coming. He suppressed his anger. "I wanted to ask about the fragrance of

the wine here."

Yan Ge casually replied, "Oh, this wine is brewed using Yuchen's family's ancient method. The taste is quite robust."

Yan Jiaqiang's thoughts shifted. "I see. Alright then, enjoy your time with your friends and come home for lunch tomorrow. We haven't had a meal together as a family since your return."

Yan Ge agreed, turned, and went back to the private room.

Seeing Yan Jiaqiang's expression, Xu Kai and the others assumed he had learned about Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen's relationship. Without asking, they continued discussing light topics, letting Lu Hanya and her somewhat shy boyfriend join the conversation while they awaited the arrival of the food.

After a satisfying meal, everyone was in high spirits.

Yan Ge then sent his friends off in a taxi. He and Huangfu Yuchen didn't drive, instead opting to stroll along the road.

"Thinking about your father?" Huangfu Yuchen asked.

"I don't know how he plans to use me again," Yan Ge looked up at the sky, "Several times before, I couldn't help but wonder if I'm really his biological son."

Huangfu Yuchen recalled Yan Jiaqiang's appearance. There was a striking resemblance between Yan Jiaqiang and Yan Ge. "If you don't want to go, then don't. Xiao Ge, I don't want you to feel wronged or force yourself."

"Since I've already agreed, I'll go," Yan Ge had a plan in mind, "If they want me to do something I'm unwilling to do, I'll just refuse directly."

"I'll go with you tomorrow," Huangfu Yuchen didn't have a good impression of Yan Jiaqiang, Du Rulan, Yan Weifeng, and especially Yan Yan. Yan Yan appeared innocent on the surface, but it was far from the truth.

Yan Ge shook his head, “No need. I also want to have an honest conversation with them.”

Huangfu Yuchen was about to say something, but Yan Ge slyly raised an eyebrow, “Don’t forget the cooking class I arranged for you.”

Huangfu Yuchen thought about his beloved- he wasn’t one to tolerate being taken advantage of, so he abandoned the thought.

The next day, Yan Ge drove Huangfu Yuchen to his cooking class. Afterward, he wandered around until around eleven before heading to the Yan family home.

“Welcome back,” Du Rulan greeted him.

“Mom,” Yan Ge smiled lightly, calling out. He saw Yan Jiaqiang, Du Rulan, Yan Weifeng, and Yan Yan all in the living room.

Du Rulan said, “Good timing, you can wash up and then we can eat.”

After washing his hands, Yan Ge came out. The servants had already set the table with food, and Yan Jiaqiang and the others were seated around it.

“Let’s sit down and eat,” Yan Jiaqiang’s tone was gentle.

Yan Ge was now more certain that his parents had some ulterior motive, seeing that they were all being so amicable. However, he didn’t show it, quietly eating and occasionally answering his parents’ questions.

After the meal, the family gathered in the living room.

“By the way, Yan Ge, did the wine in your private room last night really come from that Mr. Huangfu?” Yan Jiaqiang inquired.

Yan Ge answered truthfully, “It was brought by Yuchen. It’s brewed using the Huangfu family’s ancient method. The taste is different from regular wine. Dad, if you like it, I can have him send you a jar.”

Yan Jiaqiang continued, “Of course, that’s great. But do you know how the wine is brewed?”

Yan Ge sneered internally and smiled, “I’m not sure. Yuchen did mention he was interested in teaching me, but I wasn’t interested in learning and didn’t ask him about it.”

Yan Jiaqiang’s disappointment showed in his narrowed eyes, “I see. Yan Ge, you know that Jade Emerald Villa specializes in cuisine and emphasizes green and uniqueness. So, what I mean is, can you ask Mr. Huangfu if he’s willing to sell the recipe? Just think about it, the unique recipe could bring tremendous profits to our Yan family!”

Yan Ge shook his head, “Dad, you’re really putting me in a difficult position with this matter. It seems like Yuchen intends to start his own winery, so it’s unlikely he’d sell the recipe.”

Du Rulan furrowed her brows, “Didn’t you say he’s your lover? What kind of lover does not even give you this bit of face?”

Yan Ge was left speechless. He truly couldn’t believe that such words were coming out of Du Rulan’s mouth.

After a brief silence, he spoke again, “So, Mom and Dad, does this mean you both accept my relationship with him?”

“Impossible!” Du Rulan’s face turned cold as ice, and she said sharply.

Yan Ge found it amusing, and he actually burst into laughter, “Mom, Dad, in fact, I wanted to ask you both a long time ago: am I really your biological son?”

“Nonsense!” Yan Jiaqiang abruptly stood up, “You ungrateful child! How could you say something so disrespectful to your parents?” He raised his hand, intending to slap Yan Ge.

Yan Ge caught his wrist, pushed it away calmly, and stood up, “Yuchen’s class is ending soon, I should go.”

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“Yan Ge! How did you become like this?” Du Rulan suddenly felt that her second son was very unfamiliar. The previous Yan Ge was obedient, filial, always thinking of them, willing to do anything they asked, but now he’s so rebellious. He not only lacks respect for them, but treats them like strangers. Is this really her second son?

Yan Ge took a couple of steps and then stopped.

Du Rulan snorted and raised an eyebrow at him, waiting for him to apologize.

“Mom, Dad, I’ve given you my company and several properties. Whenever you have time, you can handle the paperwork,” Yan Ge said without looking back and left.

“Dad, I’ll talk to him,” Yan Weifeng followed him. He felt something odd about Yan Ge. He had someone investigate Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, but they only found that the two of them appeared in the commercial area and then traveled to the capital city. Apart from that, there was nothing else. It was as if these two had just appeared out of thin air. This made him more certain that Huangfu Yuchen’s identity wasn’t simple; otherwise, how could they hide their origins so deeply? He didn’t dare to act rashly, which is why he hadn’t intervened earlier.

Yan Ge knew that Yan Weifeng had followed him. He didn’t walk quickly, and when Yan Weifeng approached, he turned and waited. He secretly observed him, realizing that in the Yan family, he truly seemed like an outsider. He wasn’t close to his parents, nor did he have a strong bond with this older brother. Yan Ge remembered that in their childhood, the relationship between the two brothers was fine, but as Yan Weifeng grew

older, Yan Jiaqiang began to groom him as the heir. Yan Weifeng always seemed busy, and even when they did meet, it was just a pat on the shoulder. Yan Ge had wanted to be close to his older brother when he was young, but as he grew older, that desire faded. Later, when Yan Yan came along, Yan Jiaqiang and his wife treated him like a treasure, even Yan Weifeng became more fond of Yan Yan. It could be said that Yan Ge grew up in his family's negligence; not going astray was a stroke of luck.

Yan Weifeng approached. "I mentioned that I wanted to talk to you last time. Do you have time now?"

Yan Ge smiled and nodded. "Actually, I wanted to talk to you too. Get in the car."

Yan Weifeng got in, and Yan Ge didn't start the car.

"Big brother, what do you want to talk about?"

Yan Weifeng said, "Today's matter was indeed wrong on Mom and Dad's part. But you also know, Dad's always been forceful and a bit self-centered, he didn't intend to hurt you. As for Mom, she's a bit spoiled, but we juniors should try to understand."

"I'm willing to understand," Yan Ge nodded with a smile, "But understanding doesn't mean I'll simply follow their every arrangement. If you're here to discuss the matter of the wine recipe, there's no need for further explanation. And if you're trying to advise me to break up with Yuchen, it's also not possible."

Yan Weifeng was taken aback.

"Here's the thing: I won't have any financial involvement with the Yan family from now on, and I'll have control over my own life. You can pass this message on to Dad and Mom." Yan Ge dropped a bombshell with a casual tone, and then added nonchalantly, "By the way, big brother, I want to ask you, do you think it's possible that I'm not really their biological son?"

Yan Jianqiang and Du Rulan had always been cold toward him, and Yan Weifeng had noticed it too. It seemed strange, but it wasn't his concern, and he was usually too busy to pay attention to such matters.

"… Of course, you're their biological son."

Yan Ge's reply was quite flat. "Oh," he said, "Well then, I'll leave it to you and Yan Yan to take care of them."

"What do you mean?" Yan Weifeng stared at him intently and asked in a deep voice.

Yan Ge smiled, "Since my parents don't like me, there's no need for me to keep appearing before them. Give it some time, and when Yuchen gets his driver's license and passport, we'll travel. You and Yan Yan can show them filial piety."

By completely excluding himself from the Yan family, Yan Ge gave Yan Weifeng a sense of bewilderment.

"You should sit down and have a proper talk with Mom and Dad."

"No need." Yan Ge tapped the steering wheel lightly and said casually, "You also know how much effort I put in before to gain their approval, but I've never succeeded. There's no need for it now."

He glanced at his watch, "I need to go pick up Yuchen."

Yan Weifeng could only get out of the car, watching the blue off-road vehicle drive away. He felt an inexplicable sense of emptiness, as if the Yan family would surely regret this in the future.

After class, Huangfu Yuchen walked downstairs. Yan Ge hadn't arrived yet, so he stood by the roadside waiting.

Several girls who had attended class with him looked at him with admiring eyes. This man was already of high quality, and now that he had learned cooking, he was even more perfect. Unfortunately, this good man was already spoken for; otherwise, why would he be learning cooking?

“Hey handsome, where are you going? Let me give you a ride,” a beautiful woman in a convertible stopped in front of Huangfu Yuchen, removed her sunglasses, and cast a flirtatious glance at him.

Huangfu Yuchen curved his lips into a smile, and walked down the steps.

The beauty felt delighted, but she watched as Huangfu Yuchen’s gaze didn’t even flicker toward her car. Instead, he walked to the side of an SUV, reached out to touch the head that poked out from the car window, and pressed a kiss onto that person’s forehead.

The beauty was surprised and sighed in disappointment. She could see clearly; it was a man inside the car! All the good men these days were already taken.

As Huangfu Yuchen got into the car, Yan Ge teased, “I haven’t had lunch yet. Are we going to buy groceries now?”

“You haven’t had lunch? Did the Yan Family say something unpleasant again?” Huangfu Yuchen frowned, pulled him into a hug, and kissed the corner of his smiling eyes. “Don’t go there next time.”

“Yeah,” Yan Ge tilted his head up.

Huangfu Yuchen held his head, planting a thorough kiss before letting go. “Let’s go buy groceries. Eggs, corn, carrots, tomatoes, cucumbers, and dried white fruits. I’ll make you egg fried rice today. I’ll prepare vegetarian dishes for you tomorrow, and meat dishes the day after.”

“You can make egg fried rice?” Yan Ge looked at him skeptically. “You’ve only had half a day of class.”

“Are you underestimating me?” Huangfu Yuchen’s large palm landed on Yan Ge’s thigh. “Drive.”

Yan Ge started the car but couldn’t help glance at him again. He imagined him wearing an apron and holding a spatula, and couldn’t help but chuckle.

“What are you laughing at?” Huangfu Yuchen asked knowingly.

“Nothing, nothing,” Yan Ge didn’t dare to admit what he was daydreaming; it would be his loss if Huangfu Yuchen refused to cook.

They went to the supermarket and bought the necessary ingredients. Back home, Huangfu Yuchen carried the groceries to the kitchen.

Yan Ge brought over a chair and camera, sitting near the kitchen door.

Huangfu Yuchen turned to look at him with a meaningful smile, then calmly began the preparations. He cooked the rice, washed and sliced the tomatoes and cucumbers, and beat the eggs.

Yan Ge got so engrossed in watching him that he absentmindedly walked into the kitchen and forgot to take pictures. After twenty minutes, Huangfu Yuchen placed a fragrant plate of egg fried rice on the dining table.

Yan Ge looked at the delicious-looking egg fried rice and couldn’t bear to eat it. Huangfu Yuchen used fresh red tomato slices and green cucumber slices to form a heart shape on the round plate. The egg fried rice was surrounded by the heart, adorned with golden eggs, emerald cucumber dices, orange corn, and red carrot dices as decoration. It was irresistible.

“Try it,” Huangfu Yuchen handed him a spoon and watched as Yan Ge stared at the dish but hesitated to eat it. He smiled, scooped up a spoonful of egg fried rice, and held it to Yan Ge’s mouth, “Open up.”

Yan Ge obediently ate it, and his eyes lit up. He nodded repeatedly, “It’s delicious! You should taste it too.”

There was a grain of rice on his lips, and Huangfu Yuchen squinted his eyes. He pulled Yan Ge into his arms, pressed his lips and licked the rice, then used his tongue to pry Yan Ge’s teeth open and enter his mouth.

After responding briefly, Yan Ge pushed him away, looking straight at the egg fried rice. “Let’s eat first.”

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled and let him go.

“You try it too, it really tastes great.” Yan Ge fed him a spoonful.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, “It’s not bad, but I forgot to add green onions. It would’ve been even more flavorful.”

Both of them ate the whole plate of egg fried rice together.

“We’ll have this for dinner tonight.” Yan Ge licked his lips, seeming unsatisfied.

“Alright.” Huangfu Yuchen took the plate to the kitchen, then came back, bringing fruits with him. He sat down next to Yan Ge. “Baby, what are the arrangements for the afternoon?”

“I’m going to get your passport and driver’s license after four o’clock.” Yan Ge reclined on the sofa, picked up the remote from the coffee table, and turned on the TV. “How about going to a movie tonight?”

“Okay. How did you manage to get the driver’s license and passport so quickly?” Huangfu Yuchen washed the fruits and brought them over, sitting down beside Yan Ge.

“Having connections makes things easier. Remember Xu Kai? I asked him to help.” He rested his head on Huangfu Yuchen’s thigh and said, “But you should practice driving more. We’ll drive to the outskirts tomorrow after lunch. I know a place that’s perfect for you to practice.”

Huangfu Yuchen fed him grapes. “And have a field battle on the side.”

Yan Ge’s lips twitched. He shifted his gaze from the TV and asked, “Did you visit some messy website?”

Huangfu Yuchen calmly responded, “No. That was a slip of the tongue. I meant to say picnic. By the way, baby, what does ‘field battle’ mean?”

“Field battle… It’s outdoor combat, a military term. Watch TV, watch TV.” Yan Ge spoke seriously, fully engrossed in watching the television.

Huangfu Yuchen didn’t expose him, secretly calculating what he should bring for their outing tomorrow. The Earth of the 21st century was a good

place, offering everything one could need. He felt that he and his beloved could spend more time on Earth.

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Yan Ge's proposed location for practicing driving was Fengshan, an undeveloped area outside the imperial capital with a forest at the foot of the mountain. This was the only place in the capital that remained undeveloped, hence it was rarely visited by people.

Huangfu Yuchen was driving, while Yan Ge provided guidance from the passenger seat. In less than an hour, Huangfu Yuchen had become a proficient driver, comparable to an experienced driver.

"Baby, I think we should prepare more gas. That way, we can use a car even if we travel through other time and space." Huangfu Yuchen said as he got out of the car.

"Sure. But the purchase of gas is limited, so we need to prepare in advance." Yan Ge opened the trunk and took out two bottles of mineral water, tossing one to Huangfu Yuchen. "Let's go behind the mountain and take a look. It should be cooler there."

"Alright." Huangfu Yuchen noticed some steps carved into the mountain and held Yan Ge's hand as they walked towards them.

The trees on the mountain were densely packed, casting large patches of shade that shielded them from the sun. The wind blew gently, providing a refreshing feeling without being too strong. The two of them strolled along, thoroughly enjoying this leisurely experience.

Behind them came the voices of young people chatting and laughing. Yan Ge recognized a voice and turned his head, only to see Yan Yan and several other young men and women walking towards them with excitement.

“Look ahead, two handsome guys!” Jie Yingying nudged Le Guan’s arm, lowering her voice.

Le Guan looked at the two men and found herself captivated. The man on the left was tall with an upright posture, a cold expression, and a majestic demeanor. The man on the right also had a tall figure, a smile on his lips, handsome features, and was dressed in a well-tailored casual khaki outfit that made him look both elegant and relaxed.

Yan Yan followed their gazes and was taken aback. “Second Brother.”

Yan Ge nodded. “Yan Yan, are they your friends?”

“Yes.” Yan Yan’s gaze shifted subtly to Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen’s clasped hands. He wrinkled his brow slightly and quickly glanced at his friends.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen both noticed his subtle movement but didn’t pay it much mind.

Yan Ge was about to say something when Jie Yingying walked up to Yan Yan and said coquettishly, “Yan Yan, do you know them? I
Why don’t you introduce us?”

Yan Yan reluctantly introduced, “This is my Second Brother, Yan Ge, and that’s his friend, Huangfu Yuchen.”

“Xiao Ge, let’s go. Don’t interrupt the young people’s playtime.” Huangfu Yuchen spoke.

Yan Ge nodded and turned to Yan Yan. “Stay safe.”

They turned and left.

Huang Jie exclaimed, “Look at their hands…”

The others suddenly realized and made strange sounds, “Ah.” Then, they collectively turned their gaze towards Yan Yan.

“Does your Second Brother like guys?” Liu Chao looked at Yan Yan with a suggestive look, smiling meaningfully.

Yan Yan blushed with anger. He took a few steps forward and caught up with Yan Ge, yelling, “Yan Ge! Have you no shame? You don’t even consider the impact outside!”

Huangfu Yuchen’s eyes darkened and a glance like an ice shard shot towards Yan Yan.

Yan Yan shuddered, feeling a chill down his spine. He felt a bit wronged, and his eyes reddened. Unfortunately, no one seemed to buy into his act.

Yan Ge gave Huangfu Yuchen’s hand a squeeze and smiled at Yan Yan. “What impact could a nobody like me have? Could I possibly bring about the end of the world? Just enjoy yourselves.”

With that, he paid no further attention to Yan Yan and walked away with Huangfu Yuchen.

Seeing the two of them chatting and laughing, seemingly carefree, Yan Yan felt even more frustrated by their indifference to his scolding. His face turned bright red.

The short haired Nie Jingjing was the first to speak. “Actually, they match quite well.”

Yan Yan was annoyed, but he couldn’t say much to Nie Jingjing, a girl.

Le Guan sighed regretfully. “It’s a pity that our fellow sisters have lost two choices.”

Gan Tian nodded. “But our fellow brothers are in luck.”

Yu Haolei, the most mature among them, patted Yan Yan’s shoulder reassuringly. “Alright, don’t mind it. Let’s find a place to camp. Nightfall is approaching.”

Yan Yan glanced towards the direction Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had gone, then turned his head. “Let’s go to the other side.”

For the sake of his mood, the others had to follow him.

Yan Yan’s low mood persisted for a while. Liu Chao punched him and subtly gestured towards the four beautiful women. In a low voice, he said, “Come on, buddy, today is a rare opportunity. Don’t mess things up.”

Yan Yan’s tone dripped with disdain. “I just can’t understand how a man can like another man. Disgusting! Whatever, I don’t care.”

“Both of you, hurry up!” Jie Yingying stood on a rock not far away, waving to urge them.

“We’re coming!” Yan Yan and Liu Chao rushed forward.

By now, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had reached the mountaintop. It was cooler at the summit, and they even sensed a faint spiritual energy, which surprised them. When they first arrived on Earth, they found the spiritual energy here was sparse, especially in urban areas. The reason their spirit gathering formation didn’t attract attention was partly due to the scarcity of spiritual energy.

“Perhaps there are spiritual objects in this mountain,” Yan Ge speculated.

Huangfu Yuchen wasn’t particularly interested. He saw a relatively flat grassy area ahead and suggested, “How about we have our picnic here, baby?”

“Alright.” Yan Ge comfortably lay down, enjoying the gentle breeze.

Huangfu Yuchen patted his knee and said, “I’ll go get the things.”

If not for the presence of others on the mountain, they could have directly retrieved the necessary items from their spatial storage.

Huangfu Yuchen had descended the mountain when suddenly, the wind changed from hot to cold. Trees shook violently as the wind direction

shifted from south to north, accompanied by a drop in temperature. The rustling of leaves sounded like a chorus of whispers, one wave higher than the next. Spiritual energy surged through the mountain at a rapid pace, moving towards the north.

“Cultivators?” Huangfu Yuchen’s curiosity was piqued. Yan Ge had mentioned that this world had no cultivators, so where did these cultivators come from? And who were the opponents they were fighting?

The wind grew stronger, howling as it swept through the area, causing clouds to swirl and tumble rapidly in the sky.

Huangfu Yuchen casually carried the picnic equipment, his figure flashing as he instantly appeared near the battlefield. He saw that one side of the battle was dressed in camouflage uniforms. The other side had sharp facial features, a prominent nose, and hair that wasn’t black. They were very much like the foreigners he had seen on TV.

In the center of the battlefield stood an elderly man who appeared to be around fifty years old, and a middle-aged man with brown hair. Behind the elderly man were four people in camouflage uniforms, all injured and pale. They had serious expressions as they watched the battle. Behind the middle-aged man stood four people, one woman and three men, looking smugly at the others in camouflage uniforms.

The elderly man was named Wang Zhiyuan, and his cultivation was at the early stage of Foundation Establishment. He had thought that with his abilities, he could surpass Bishop Chardock, but Bishop Chardock proved to be much more difficult to deal with than he had anticipated.

“Hahaha! Mr. Wang, surrender!” Bishop Chardock forced Wang Zhiyuan to retreat repeatedly, laughing arrogantly. “If you’re willing to surrender, I can spare your life.”

“Don’t even think about it!” Wang Zhiyuan infused true qi into his fists, making them as solid as iron hammers. He aimed his fists at Bishop Chardock, and the excess true qi crackled like electricity.

Bishop Chardock’s expression changed; he knew these fists were extraordinary and couldn’t be taken lightly. A white light surged within him, and he shouted loudly as he used his palms to meet Wang Zhiyuan’s fists head-on.

The two powerful forces collided fiercely, shooting into the sky and piercing through the rolling black clouds. With a deafening bang, heavy rain poured down, accompanied by fierce winds. Fengshan was engulfed in a sudden downpour, as if it were being struck by a typhoon.

On the other side of the mountain

On the other side of the mountain, Yan Yan and the group managed to take refuge in a tent just in time. However, the strong wind quickly flipped the tent over, and they rolled and tumbled down the hillside while screaming. Luckily, they were stopped by trees. Although they managed to escape, they were drenched by the heavy rain and everyone’s mood was at its worst. They had managed to arrange dates with the girls they liked, hoping for a romantic night, but instead, they were faced with such terrible weather, leaving no room for romance.

“Is everyone here?” Yu Haolei sat on the ground, gripping tufts of grass in each hand to anchor himself. He surveyed his surroundings, “Where’s Le Guan?”

Seeing that Le Guan was missing, Yan Yan’s group became anxious and shouted loudly, “Le Guan! Le Guan!”

The rain drowned out their voices, and there was no response.

Gan Tian hugged a tree for support, her clothes soaked, her blue bra and panties visible due to the wet fabric and Liu Chao and Huang Jie couldn’t help but glance at her.

couldn’t hold back her tears and sobbed, “Wu… Sister Ying Ying, what should we do now? The wind is so strong, and the rain is pouring down so heavily. Where can we find Le Guan?”

Jie Yingying was wearing a white dress and was equally disheveled. “Everyone, don’t panic. We can’t scatter further. Should we go down the mountain and find help?”

“No, we can’t leave Le Guan behind!” Yan Yan’s expression changed. “What if she’s in danger?”

Yu Haolei thought for a moment and shouted, “Yan Yan, isn’t your second brother also on the mountain? Let’s go find them first and ask for their help.”

When Yan Ge saw Yan Yan approaching, his friends in disarray and shouting to each other, he frowned slightly.

Gan Tian’s sharp eyes spotted him first. “Second Brother! Second Brother! We’re here!”

Yan Yan looked at Yan Ge, who held an umbrella in one hand and a bundle of ropes in the other, walking towards them steadily. Yan Yan’s mouth opened slightly but closed just as quickly.

Yan Ge glanced over and only saw seven people. He untied the ropes and tossed them down. “Hold onto the ropes and wait here. Yan Yan, come with me.” His spiritual sense had already detected that Le Guan was nearby, lying motionless on the ground, having fainted.

“What do you want?” Yan Yan asked warily.

“To find your companion,” Yan Ge replied impatiently, grabbing Yan Yan’s arm and pulling him over to Le Guan’s side.

“Le Guan!” Yan Yan hurriedly lifted her.

On the other side, Wang Zhiyuan received a fatal blow, spitting a mouthful of blood onto the ground as he was thrown away.

“Mr. Wang!” The four in camouflage rushed over anxiously, helping him up. “Mr. Wang, how are you?”

“Bishop Chardock, kill him quickly!” The beautiful woman with a “△” figure shouted in a charming voice, playing with a strand of wavy hair. Behind her smiling eyes hid cruelty and a desire to kill.

“Alright.” Chardock smirked and agreed, gathering holy light in his right palm and thrusting it towards Wang Zhiyuan.

The milky white holy light resembled a pillar, flying towards Wang Zhiyuan at high speed.

The thin man who had been touching Wang Zhiyuan’s right arm quickly changed his expression. Reacting the fastest, he positioned himself in front of Wang Zhiyuan, concentrating the little true qi left in his body on his chest. He was preparing for a strike that even Wang Zhiyuan might not be able to withstand.

“Move aside, Mingwei!” Wang Zhiyuan spit out another mouthful of blood from the effort of talking.

The pain Mingwei had been waiting for didn’t come. Bewildered, he raised his eyes and saw an unfamiliar figure.

“Who are you?” Chardock’s strength faltered, and he retracted his palm. He looked at Huangfu Yuchen with cold, vigilant eyes. The person who could withstand his strike wasn’t simple. However, what was strange was that he couldn’t sense any power from this person. The newcomer seemed like an ordinary person.

Wang Zhiyuan looked at Huangfu Yuchen in surprise and secretly let out a breath of relief. Although he wasn’t sure of the newcomer’s identity and why he had intervened, the most important thing now was to survive. As long as he survived, he had a chance to hold on to the treasure he had acquired.

“Are you all Chinese?” Huangfu Yuchen asked Wang Zhiyuan’s group.

“Yes,” Wang Zhiyuan’s eyes were resolute, without hesitation.

“And are you foreigners?” Huangfu Yuchen turned his gaze to Chardock.

Chardock crossed his arms, his tone arrogant. “So what if we are?”

“No big deal.” Huangfu Yuchen pointed to Wang Zhiyuan’s group. “I prefer the clothes they’re wearing. So, it would be best for you to leave. Otherwise, don’t blame me for being impolite.”

“Oh?” Chardock sneered, his aura growing colder. “I’m curious to see how impolite you can be.”

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With the support of Ruan Mingwei and He Hong, Wang Zhiyuan struggled to stand up. He discreetly observed Huangfu Yuchen, and his mood didn't ease, but rather grew heavier. When did China produce such a skilled expert? As one of the hidden elders of the Covert Operations Group, he hadn't received the slightest bit of news about this. The fact that this person had landed a hit on Chardock showed his high cultivation level. It was unclear whether he was friend or foe.

Ruan Mingwei, He Hong, Ji Chang, and Zhang Jian all thought about this, but seeing the arrogant Chardock defeated by Huangfu Yuchen, they felt a sense of gratification.

Chardock's fury surged, his holy light overflowing. The decorative fur on his collar bristled like an irritated rooster's feathers. Staring at Huangfu Yuchen, he shouted, "Alan, Barry, Daisy, Borg, attack together!"

"Yes!"

Without Chardock's order, Alan, Barry, Daisy, and Borg, moved to encircle Huangfu Yuchen along with him.

Huangfu Yuchen stood in a casual posture, his right hand still in his pocket. He caught a glimpse of Wang Zhiyuan's group not seizing the opportunity to escape and got a favorably impression towards them.

Chardock was secretly alarmed. This person was surrounded by five experts, yet he didn't even take a defensive stance. How confident was he? However, the dignity of a bishop didn't permit anyone to trample upon it. A confrontation was certain.

Chardock discreetly stepped back and thundered, "Capture him for me!"

Alan, Barry, and the others had no idea that their bishop was afraid of Huangfu Yuchen, and they had high fighting spirit. They charged towards Huangfu Yuchen as soon as they received the order.

Huangfu Yuchen didn't know how many cultivators were on Earth and wad unsure how many formidable individuals existed, so he didn't reveal his full strength. He feigned about seventy moves against Alan and the others before his palm technique suddenly turned sharp and deadly. His palms struck consecutively, injuring the four.

"You wait! It's not over yet! Let's go!" Chardock left a bitter threat and dashed off into the distance.

Alan and the others covered their injuries, glaring at Huangfu Yuchen in resentment before quickly following.

Huangfu Yuchen didn't pursue, turning his attention to Wang Zhiyuan.

Wang Zhiyuan clasped his hands together, expressing gratitude, "Thank you, senior, for lending a hand. If not for you, the treasure of our nation might have been snatched by those foreigners."

Though simple, these words were cleverly constructed. They implied to Huangfu Yuchen that they were working for the country and he shouldn't covet their possessions.

Huangfu Yuchen looked at him with a smile that wasn't quite a smile. "You're just in the late phase of the Foundation Establishment stage. Your possessions are hardly worth catching my eye. Besides, do you think that you and your companions could escape if I truly intended to seize them,?"

Ruan Mingwei and his group's expressions grew serious.

Wang Zhiyuan didn't mind and spoke politely, "It seems I've thought ill of my superior with my poor mindset. It's our fortune to meet you, senior. I'm Wang Zhiyuan. May I know how to address you, senior?"

“Huangfu Yuchen,” Huangfu Yuchen replied. “Let me ask you, do you know the highest cultivation level in Huaxia?”

Wang Zhiyuan contemplated for a moment. Could this senior have been in seclusion for quite a while? But he understood that honesty was the best policy. As things stood, this person didn’t seem hostile and fabricating lies could potentially create a future adversary. So he answered honestly, “It’s the late stages of the Divine Transformation Stage.”

After he finished, Wang Zhiyuan cautiously inquired, “May I ask, what level is senior at now?”

Huangfu Yuchen didn’t reply immediately. He swept his spiritual sense over Wang Zhiyuan’s body from top to bottom and casually commented, “You once nearly fell into demonic possession due to hastiness during the Initial Foundation Establishment stage. Since then, your progress has been even slower.”

Wang Zhiyuan was startled and smiled wryly. “Senior has keen insight.”

Without saying another word, Huangfu Yuchen suddenly slapped Wang Zhiyuan on the back.

“Old Wang!” Ruan Mingwei and the others rushed over in alarm.

“Don’t come closer!” Wang Zhiyuan sternly stopped them. He had an intuition that Huangfu Yuchen had no malicious intent. If he did, there was no need for saying all those things.

Ruan Mingwei glances with the others and stood a few steps away.

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at them, then sent some true qi into Wang Zhiyuan’s body, gently repairing and widening his damaged meridians.

Wang Zhiyuan was delighted. He immediately calmed his mind and regulated his breath. After a while, he entered a meditative state.

Ruan Mingwei and the others were elated. As cultivators, they understood the significance of meditation. Even if their cultivation level didn’t increase,

their realm would become more stable. They stood quietly to the side, watching Huangfu Yuchen gratefully.

About half an hour later, the aura around Wang Zhiyuan suddenly changed. However, Ruan Mingwei and the others at the Initial Foundation Establishment stage weren't prepared and were nearly forced to kneel under his pressure.

Wang Zhiyuan quickly restrained his aura. He respectfully bowed to Huangfu Yuchen, "Thank you, senior. I've now reached the Mid-Foundation Establishment stage."

Huangfu Yuchen waved his hand. "Your talents are decent, but unfortunately, the spiritual energy is thin here. Your potential for advancement is limited."

"Yes," Wang Zhiyuan sighed. "Earth has suffered severe destruction. Many places with spiritual energy have been obliterated."

Ruan Mingwei and the others exchanged hopeful glances. They simultaneously thought, if this expert was willing to help them… However, they understood the importance of restraint. They didn't want to take advantage of Huangfu Yuchen's goodwill. They thanked him in unison, "Thank you, senior, for helping Old Wang."

Huangfu Yuchen considered this meeting to be fate. He took out five Foundation Establishment Pills from his storage ring. "Foundation Establishment Pills are usually taken at the beginning of cultivation, but it's not too late to take them now. They can expand your meridians and aid in absorbing spiritual energy. However, these pills were my experimental works, and I accidentally added a trace of Lotus Grass. You decide whether to take them or not."

Ruan Mingwei and the others looked delighted. "Thank you, senior!" Lotus Grass could cause some mild diarrhea, but it wouldn't have any other negative effects. Compared to the benefits of increased cultivation, this was nothing.

They glanced at Wang Zhiyuan. The Covert Operations Group consisted not only of the five of them but others as well. Typically, when receiving cultivation resources, the higher cultivators used them first. Even if these Foundation Establishment Pills ended up in their hands, they might not keep them for themselves.

Wang Zhiyuan said, “Since senior has given them to you, they belong to you.”

“Thank you, Old Wang!”

Wang Zhiyuan continued, “Senior Huangfu—”

Huangfu Yuchen interrupted him, “Just call me Mr. Huangfu.”

“Very well, Mr. Huangfu. You must have left seclusion recently, right?” Wang Zhiyuan took out a business card, “This is my contact information. Mr. Huangfu, you’ve saved my life and provided guidance. In the future, if you have any instructions, I’ll do my best, as long as it’s within my capabilities.”

Huangfu Yuchen directly handed his phone to Wang Zhiyuan, “Add your contacts.”

The added their numbers and Huangfu Yuchen was satisfied to see a few more entries in his “Contacts.”

“Yuchen,” Yan Ge approached lightly. His spiritual sense had already seen the situation here, so he didn’t conceal the fact that he also possessed cultivation.

Wang Zhiyuan’s pupils contracted; yet another high-level cultivator whose cultivation was difficult to discern!

“Baby,” Huangfu Yuchen embraced him by the waist, handing over his phone, “Look at my contacts list.”

Yan Ge glanced at it and held back a smile. “Not bad.” Yuchen was a classic phone enthusiast. When he had arrived on Earth, his contacts list had only

contained “Baby,” which felt awkward no matter how one looked at it. He stored numbers for checking his phone balance, ordering takeout, and even the newspaper office’s number. Later, with the addition of Xu Kai and others, he had around ten contacts. Now, thankfully, the contacts list finally had a few more respectable entries.

“I wonder who this senior is?” Wang Zhiyuan politely asked.

Yan Ge nodded at him. “You can just call me Yan Ge.”

Naturally, Wang Zhiyuan couldn’t address him so informally. “So it’s Mr. Yan, nice to meet you.”

Huangfu Yuchen: “Alright, we won’t keep you any longer. We should be on our way too. Rest assured, Old Wang, even if I need to trouble you in the future, it won’t involve your secrets.”

Wang Zhiyuan was about to respond, but he found that the two before him had vanished, leaving him both astonished and envious.

“Old Wang?” Ruan Mingwei walked up to his side.

Wang Zhiyuan snapped back to reality. “Let’s go back.”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen appeared at the mountaintop.

“Is everything settled over there?” Huangfu Yuchen didn’t even want to mention words like “Yan Yan” or “your brother.”

Yan Ge said, “They’re right ahead. They seemed frightened and insisted I accompany them down the mountain. I was worried about you, so I came to find you first.”

The rain had stopped long ago, the wind had subsided, but the sky remained gloomy. Huangfu Yuchen frowned. “Let’s just make sure they reach the bottom of the mountain.”

Yan Ge nodded indifferently. There was only the path to go down the mountain anyway.

Yan Yan and the others sat on the rocky slope halfway up the mountain, each of them soaked, tired, and hungry. They had been drenched by the rain, their minds were hazy, and being deep within the mountains, they couldn’t differentiate directions. Otherwise, they would have already descended on their own. When they saw Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, their eyes lit up.

“Keep up with us,” Yan Ge walked past them without stopping, leaving only these words behind. He and Huangfu Yuchen walked further, side by side.

The group didn’t have the energy to say much, silently following behind.

They felt that Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were insensitive, but fearing to provoke them, they reluctantly refrained from making any comments and kept silent.

Upon reaching the foot of the mountain, Yan Ge escorted them to where they had parked their car. After lending them his phone to inform their families, he and Huangfu Yuchen left in their vehicle.

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In Yan Jiaqiang's study, an eerie quietness pervaded the air.

Yan Jiaqiang looked at Yan Weifeng, his expression grim, "Did he really say that?"

"Yes." Yan Weifeng ran his fingers through his hair, eyes cast down in contemplation. "Dad, in my opinion, it's better not to antagonize Yan Ge."

Yan Jiaqiang's face remained stern, his voice rising, "Not antagonize him? Am I the one causing the conflict? He's the one who doesn't respect me as his father! Should I, his own father, go begging for reconciliation?"

"Dad," Yan Weifeng finally asked, "Why don't you and Mom like Yan Ge?"

Yan Jiaqiang frowned, seemingly unable to comprehend why he was being asked this. "Like or dislike? He's my son too, and I've raised him. What more do you want?"

Yan Weifeng fell silent. He wasn't the head of the family yet and many things, even with differing opinions, were hard to act upon. The decline of the Yan family's business was becoming evident, and although a marriage alliance seemed like a good solution, Yan Ge's strong-willed nature made him an unlikely candidate. Not to mention the presence of Huangfu Yuchen by his side, who was currently unfathomable.

"What's your plan now?" Yan Jiaqiang asked dismissively. "Since he can say such things, I'll consider him as if he's not my son anymore. As for the marriage alliance, Yan Yan will do. He's nineteen and suitable for Zou Tingran, Zou's eldest daughter."

Yan Weifeng was taken aback. Yan Yan? Their father had always doted on Yan Yan. While Yan Yan's influence had waned somewhat as he grew older, it was surprising that his father would suggest such a marriage. Especially considering that Yan Yan was recently close to a female classmate, there was no way he would agree to a marriage.

At that moment, cries and the clicking of high heels echoed from outside the room.

Shortly after, the study door was pushed open, hitting the wall with a resounding "thud."

Du Rulan entered, her face cold as she exclaimed sharply, "Jiaqiang, go see what trouble Yan Ge has caused! Look at the state Yan Yan is in!"

"What's all this noise?" Yan Jiaqiang's brows furrowed. "Look at you, what's the difference between you and those quarrelsome women outside?"

Du Rulan was momentarily stunned. She looked at herself, then her eyes widened in disbelief as she stared at Yan Jiaqiang. "You, you actually called me a quarrelsome woman?"

Yan Weifeng intervened, "Mom, what's wrong with Yan Yan?"

Thinking about Yan Yan and fueled by anger, Du Rulan momentarily forgot about her argument with Yan Jiaqiang. "He went camping with classmates in Fengshan and they encountered Yan Ge and a certain Huangfu. There was a sudden rainstorm in Fengshan, and Yan Ge didn't even bother to protect Yan Yan. Yan Yan got drenched like a chicken, and now he's coming down with a cold."

"What's the big deal about a cold? Just call a doctor over," Yan Jiaqiang grew increasingly displeased with Du Rulan. "How many times have I told you to knock before coming into the study? Don't you know that Weifeng and I were discussing important matters?"

Du Rulan felt somewhat guilty. With many servants in the house, there was a rule to knock before entering the study to prevent passing servants from

hearing discussions. She pursed her lips and said gently, “Fine, it’s my fault. What important matters were you discussing?”

Yan Jiaqiang retrieved a document from the drawer and replied impatiently, “Let’s talk about it later. As for the marriage alliance, let Yan Yan marry Zou Tingran’s daughter.”

“What?” Du Rulan’s eyes widened. “Husband, are you suggesting Yan Yan enters a marriage alliance? Can’t he find someone he likes for himself? Besides, you know how stubborn Yan Yan is. He won’t agree to a marriage.”

Yan Weifeng suddenly realized why Yan Ge felt that his parents didn’t treat him like their own. His father said to consider Yan Ge as if he doesn’t exist, and his mother seemed completely unfazed. He couldn’t help but doubt whether Yan Ge was truly their biological child. However, he was three years older than Yan Ge, and he vaguely remembered Yan Ge’s birth. There was no doubt that Yan Ge was their natural child.

“He won’t agree? Then let the Yan company continue to decline,” Yan Jiaqiang retorted, glaring at Du Rulan.

Du Rulan mumbled, “Is it impossible for Yan Ge to marry? He’s still a son of the Yan family, and he’s around the same age as Zou’s eldest daughter. He’s the most suitable match. Yan Yan is still young.”

“That’s fine too, as long as you can convince him,” Yan Jiaqiang replied without looking up.

Du Rulan sensed something amiss in her husband’s demeanor. “Honey, are you in a bad mood today? Why are you so irritable?

Yan Weifeng stood up, “Mom, Dad, you should talk things over. I’ll go check on Xiao Si.”

…

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had no idea that a storm was brewing within the Yan family. Even if they did, they wouldn't care. They were driving to the supermarket and were planning on going on a road trip to S Province. Their overall plan was to visit domestic attractions before heading abroad.

People in the supermarket noticed two handsome guys walking in, both wearing identical short-sleeved T-shirts. One of them had his arm around the other's shoulder, and their presence was enough to cause whispers and even low-key speculation about them being celebrities.

Huangfu Yuchen removed his sunglasses from the bridge of his nose and casually pushed two shopping carts. "Baby, let's split up. I'll get the food, and you can handle the rest."

"OK." Yan Ge grabbed two bottles of mineral water as he passed by the drinks section.

Huangfu Yuchen guided his cart to the food section.

Yan Ge recalled that the tissues in the car were running out, so he picked up a box. After a moment of thought, he took two more boxes and continued searching for other necessities, including some seasonings.

Huangfu Yuchen added a pack of Kang Da Fu spicy beef noodles to his cart, followed by a pack of mushroom stewed chicken noodles. His phone rang, and he pulled it out of his pocket to glance at it. The caller ID said "Ji Chang."

"Yes?" Huangfu Yuchen answered the call, placing another pack of Laotan pickled cabbage beef noodles into the cart.

"Greetings Mr. Huangfu. It's been a week since we last met. I'm calling on behalf of Mr. Wang, Mr. Ruan Mingwei, Mr. He Hong, and Mr. Zhang Jian, just to check in."

"I appreciate it." Huangfu Yuchen replied nonchalantly. "Is Mr. Wang recovering?"

Ji Chang sounded somewhat excited. While Huangfu Yuchen appeared cold and indifferent, he was actively concerned about Mr. Wang. “Yes, thanks to your care, Mr. Wang is doing better. But that’s not the main reason I’m calling. There’s an inter-monastery exchange next Wednesday. Are you and Mr. Yan interested?”

“Time and address,” Huangfu Yuchen said. “If Xiao Ge and I are free, we’ll consider going.”

Ji Chang provided the details and then asked, “Where should we deliver the invitation letter?”

“Let’s talk about it when the time comes.” Huangfu Yuchen inadvertently caught a glimpse of a familiar figure darting behind a shelf.

Standing next to the food shelves was a man wearing sunglasses, holding a cute boy of around four or five in his arms. He was unmistakably Yan Jiaqiang. On his right arm was a woman’s handbag hanging.

Beside him stood a woman in her mid-twenties. She was young and beautiful, and had a smile on her face. She whispered something to the young boy, who then turned his head and planted a kiss on Yan Jiaqiang’s cheek.

Yan Jiaqiang was grinning ear to ear, and even his well-maintained face displayed a few lines of wrinkles.

Sensing a sharp gaze on him, Yan Jiaqiang alertly raised his head and locked eyes with Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen had no intention of hiding his presence. He courteously smiled at Yan Jiaqiang.

Yan Jiaqiang had a bad feeling and passed the little boy in his arms to the woman beside him. He gave her some instructions before walking over to Huangfu Yuchen. He rapidly calculated how he could hide his infidelity and the fact that he had a mistress. Yan Jiaqiang had knowledge of the Imperial

Capital; the Yan family never came to this side. Unexpectedly, he ran into Huangfu Yuchen here.

He looked around, and sure enough, he spotted Yan Ge in the fruit section, choosing fruits with his back to him.

“Mr. Yan, what a coincidence.” Huangfu Yuchen opened with a smile. “The adorable little boy looks a lot like you. He’s about the same age as Xiao Ge’s nephew, right?”

One sentence shattered Yan Jiaqiang’s fantasies. He had no choice but to speak, “Let’s be frank, Mr. Huangfu. As long as you don’t divulge this matter, I promise not to interfere with you and Yan Ge.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s gaze turned cold. He said coolly, “I won’t keep any secrets from Xiao Ge.”

Yan Jiaqiang fell silent for a moment, then continued, “As long as you don’t tell anyone else except Yan Ge, I won’t oppose your relationship with him.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s eyes flashed with a cold light, and he neither confirmed nor denied it, saying indifferently, “Do you think you have the ability to meddle in my relationship with Xiao Ge?”

Yan Jiaqiang locked eyes with him, and was unable to retort.

Huangfu Yuchen’s lips curled into a smile, and the cold aura around him dissipated. “Rest assured, I currently have no interest in meddling in others’ affairs.”

With that, he returned to the instant noodles section and continued selecting his items.

Yan Jiaqiang also turned and left with a frown on his face.

Yan Ge pushed the shopping cart over, “Yuchen, are you done?”

“Almost.” Huangfu Yuchen put a pack of braised beef noodles into the cart.

Thinking about Yuchen's preferences, Yan Ge had a shiver and quickly glanced into his cart. Almost everything he saw was "Kang Da Fu" and he was bewildered, "Just how much do you love instant noodles?"

"Definitely second to you." Huangfu Yuchen turned his head and kissed his cheek.

Yan Ge sighed helplessly. If it wasn't for both of them cultivating, he definitely wouldn't allow Yuchen to eat so much junk food.

Huangfu Yuchen swept his gaze across the shelves, making sure not to miss any flavor before hugging Yan Ge and moving forward, "Baby, I have some bad news for you. Prepare yourself."

"Is it related to the two of us?" Yan Ge asked.

Huangfu Yuchen thought for a moment, "Probably not."

Yan Ge remained composed, "Go ahead."

Huangfu Yuchen didn't speak, he just pointed ahead.

The first person Yan Ge saw was Yan Jiaqiang. For a moment, he didn't understand what Huangfu Yuchen was trying to convey. Then he noticed the little boy beside Yan Jiaqiang, cheerfully hugging his leg. His gaze shifted, and he spotted a young woman not too far away. It suddenly dawned on him.

He calmly said, "Indeed, it has nothing to do with us. Let's go."

"Let's go and pay." Huangfu Yuchen hugged Yan Ge's shoulder and walked to the checkout counter. He casually picked something up from the shelf beside the cashier and threw it into the cart.

Yan Ge didn't avert his gaze, instead, he added a package of a different color.

Seeing the variety of instant noodles in the cart, the cashier looked at Huangfu Yuchen strangely.

Yan Ge quickly turned his head, and looked at an advertisement on the wall. He had a look of wanting to avoid trouble, as if he wanted to say—I don't know this person.

Huangfu Yuchen deliberately called out, "Xiao Ge, come help me for a moment. I need an extra pair of hands."

Yan Ge walked back helplessly, "Of course you need an extra pair of hands, you bought more than ten packets of instant noodles!"

Huangfu Yuchen advised, "We're not short on money."

Yan Ge was exasperated, "Is this about money?"

The people in line behind them were all amused.

Yan Ge quickened his pace, escaping from the supermarket as if he were fleeing.

Huangfu Yuchen hurried to catch up, a wider smile on his face. He enjoyed this feeling a lot. He and his beloved were living just like an ordinary couple.

At the parking lot, they coincidentally bumped into Yan Jiaqiang and his group head-on.

Yan Jiaqiang stiffened, his hand still on the car door.

Yan Ge's expression remained unchanged; he nodded at Yan Jiaqiang and opened the car door.

They placed their items in the back seat, got in the car, started the engine, and drove away.

MCUS Chapter 219

Yan Jiaqiang entered his home and saw Du Rulan sitting in the living room, absentmindedly flipping through TV channels and occasionally glancing at the door. It was obvious that she was waiting for him.

He felt a pang of apprehension. Could it be that Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had told Du Rulan about the situation? To be honest, causing such a scandal at his age was quite embarrassing, especially since his illegitimate son was practically the same age as his grandson, Xiao Si. But over the years, Du Rulan had shown signs of aging, growing increasingly ordinary. She was nothing like Yin Huiru, who was young, beautiful, and understanding.

Yan Jiaqiang understood that if this matter were exposed, his reputation would undoubtedly be tarnished. Yet, he couldn't bring himself to give up Yin Huiru. His youngest son, Yan Lu, was even cuter than his other three sons.

"Husband, you're back." Du Rulan's eyes showed a smile as she walked up, quickly taking the briefcase from Yan Jiaqiang's hand.

Yan Jiaqiang felt relieved. "Why aren't you asleep so late?" His expression was quite composed. He always bought his clothes in pairs, even making sure he had replacements at Yin Huiru's place in case they got stained. This was one of the reasons why he and Yin Huiru had managed to keep their affair hidden for the five years they'd been together.

"It's all because of your youngest son. He threw a tantrum earlier. You've spoiled him too much," Du Rulan said playfully, giving Yan Jiaqiang a teasing look. Unfortunately, due to her age, this gesture didn't carry the same charm and cuteness as it used to.

“What’s wrong with Yan Yan?” Yan Jiaqiang found this awkward and irritating. If this were happening at Yin Huiru’s place, they would have coaxed Yan Lu to sleep and then chatted about some lighthearted topics or engaged in activities they both enjoyed. Yin Huiru would never complain about this and that in front of him.

Du Rulan helped him loosen his tie and she instructed the maid to prepare a bath. She sighed, “I tentatively mentioned the idea of arranging a marriage between him and the Zou family’s youngest daughter. He immediately changed his expression. He was even smashing things in his room earlier. Husband, I think we should drop this matter. Let Yan Ge handle the arranged marriage. As for how to convince him, I’ll find a way. I refuse to believe that I, as his mother, can’t control him anymore.”

“No!” Yan Jiaqiang opposed immediately.

Du Rulan was taken aback, thinking she had misheard, “Husband, what did you just say?”

Yan Jiaqiang softened his tone, sat down on the sofa, and said, “Didn’t Weifeng tell you? He had people investigate the man around Yan Ge, but they found nothing. The man’s identity must be extraordinary. Our Yan family is at a critical moment right now so I think it’s better not to provoke them. Otherwise, even if the arranged marriage with the Zou family goes well, it might not save the Yan family.”

Du Rulan sat next to him and held his arm, disagreeing, “Our Yan family has a history of several hundred years in the capital. Are we afraid of some man who suddenly appeared out of nowhere? I’ve had someone inquire, and I’ve never heard of a powerful Huangfu family. Besides, Yan Yan is our most beloved son. Are you not concerned about making him marry someone he doesn’t like?”

“I said no, so it’s a no!” Yan Jiaqiang retorted, pulling away his arm and looking stern, “Don’t privately contact Yan Ge. I can’t risk the Yan family. Besides, feelings can be nurtured. The Zou family’s youngest daughter is quite good-looking, and her temperament is pleasant. She’ll definitely get along with Yan Yan. The matter is settled. I’m going to take a shower.”

After saying that, he stood up and went upstairs.

Du Rulan stared at his back in a daze, suddenly feeling that he was a stranger. This version of Yan Jiaqiang was strange. Yan Yan was their most cherished child and they had pampered him since he was young. Even when Yan Yan was occasionally willful and she reprimanded him, Yan Jiaqiang would rush to stand up for him, afraid that even a finger lifted against him might cause a storm. Once, they joked that when Yan Yan got married, he probably wouldn't be as close to them, but rather to his wife and Yan Jiaqiang said, "That's fine too. As long as our precious son is happy."

But now, Yan Jiaqiang was rigidly setting up an arranged marriage for Yan Yan, regardless of her objections and Yan Yan's feelings. It was as if he had completely changed!

Once suspicion crept in, Du Rulan couldn't help but notice more odd behaviors from Yan Jiaqiang recently. Leaving aside his attitude towards her, he suddenly seemed to care very little about Yan Yan. Could he be under some kind of influence?

Her immediate thought was to seek help from Master Xuyan.

Master Xuyan was the abbot of Mo'an Temple and a highly accomplished monk. When Yan Ge was born, Master Xuyan had told her and Yan Jiaqiang that this child would have a certain impact on the fortunes of the Yan family's business. The only solution was for neither she nor Yan Jiaqiang to get close to him; they were only to provide for his basic needs. Additionally, when he reached the age of twenty-five, he would face a great calamity. Initially, both she and Yan Jiaqiang hadn't believed it. However, on the third day after Yan Ge was born, the Yan family had nearly become embroiled in a massive tax evasion scandal. That's when they started to believe and since then, they had treated Yan Ge as an adopted child, focusing only on his basic needs and rarely showing concern. As predicted, when Yan Ge turned twenty-five, he had a health crisis and disappeared without a trace. Both she and Yan Jiaqiang had thought he had died. Now Yan Ge had suddenly reappeared, coinciding with a crisis in the Yan family. Du Rulan had even greater respect for Master Xuyan.

So, at the slightest doubt, she immediately thought of seeking guidance from him.

Back in the bedroom, Yan Jiaqiang finished his shower and was lying in bed, flipping through a magazine.

Du Rulan also went to take a shower. When she emerged, Yan Jiaqiang had already turned his back to her and fallen asleep.

She opened her mouth, but said nothing. She got onto the bed and lay down quietly.

…

After breakfast, Du Rulan watched Yan Jiaqiang's car drive away. She deliberately changed into a simple outfit and switched from high heels to flats. Carrying a slightly bulging handbag, she instructed the driver to take her to Mo'an Temple.

Mo'an Temple was one of the four major ancient temples in the capital, known for its flourishing incense. One of the reasons was its abbot, Master Xuyan.

Master Xuyan was said to be over a hundred years old, and was known for his generosity and adeptness in divination. He was highly regarded in the capital, and even a provincial governor had come to him for advice. However, Master Xuyan had a strict rule: divination was a matter of revealing heavenly secrets, so he only performed three divinations per month. Making an appointment to see him required booking several years in advance.

But Du Rulan wasn't worried. The first time they met, Master Xuyan had actively sought them out, saying that they had a connection. So, while others had to wait in line, she didn't need to, although she still had to offer incense money.

Inside Mo'an Temple, Master Xuyan was in his meditation room, sitting on a cushion, fixated on an ancient bronze triangular mirror on a small table

before him. A faint smile played on his lips as his gaze left the mirror and turned towards the closed door.

The sound of approaching footsteps reached his ears, and after a while, the door was knocked on. A young voice came from the other side.

“Master, Madam Yan is here.”

Master Xuyan’s eyes gleamed for a moment, and he responded calmly, “Which Madam Yan? I’ve already said that I shouldn’t be disturbed.”

The young monk replied, “It’s Mrs. Du Rulan.”

“Ah, it’s Mrs. Du. We have a connection with the Yan family. Please let her in.”

“Understood.”

Du Rulan waited in the corridor outside, feeling somewhat nervous. Although Master Xuyan had said that there was a connection between him and the Yan family, this was already her third time coming to disturb him. Master Xuyan was a highly accomplished monk; she wasn’t sure if he’d be willing to meet with her again. As the young monk approached her, she was still worried.

However, once the young monk said that Master Xuyan was inviting her in, she let out a sigh of relief. Her eyes behind the sunglasses noticed the jealous and envious gazes from people nearby who also wanted to meet the Master, and she couldn’t help but feel a sense of satisfaction. She adjusted her posture, her waist straightened, and her lips curved into a subtle smile.

On entering the meditation room, Du Rulan became extremely respectful. She bowed slightly toward the center of the room, and then mirrored Master Xuyan’s pose as he sat cross-legged with a prayer bead in hand. “Greetings, Master. Du Rulan has come to disturb you again.”

“Namo Amituofo. Mrs. Du doesn’t need to be overly courteous. Please have a seat,” Master Xuyan said, closing his eyes briefly before reopening them.

“Thank you, Master.” Du Rulan expressed her gratitude and took a seat beside him.

With a gentle smile, Master Xuyan spoke in a calm and assured tone, “Mrs. Du seems to be troubled.”

Du Rulan sighed, “To be honest with the Master, I’ve come this time because of my husband.”

“Oh?” Master Xuyan responded, “Mrs. Du, please feel free to share.”

Du Rulan had great trust in Master Xuyan and wasn’t concerned about him spreading the Yan family’s affairs. She proceeded to describe the recent events, “It’s like this: a few days ago, my second son, Yan Ge, returned… My husband has changed completely. He agreed to arrange a marriage for Yan Yan! You must know that he used to dote on Yan Yan the most.”

Master Xuyan’s tone was contemplative, “As expected.”

Du Rulan was surprised, “I wonder what Master means by this?”

Master Xuyan didn’t reply directly but closed his eyes, calculating briefly before opening them again. “This matter is still connected to the Second Young Master.”

Du Rulan’s lips tightened, and she asked nervously, “Master, what should I do now?”

Master Xuyan remained silent.

Du Rulan became increasingly anxious. “Master, please, you must help me. Can it be that Yan Ge’s fate is so inflexible? Not only is he going to harm our Yan family’s legacy, but he’s also going to harm his own biological father?” Seeing Master Xuyan’s continued silence, she grew alarmed. “Master? You can’t possibly mean…he is my biological son, after all…”

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Master Xuyan shook his head, “Where did Madam Du’s thoughts wander? How could I, a monk, be involved in such matters?”

“What should we do then? Please guide us, Master,” Du Rulan said, “Should my husband and I continue to keep our distance from him, as we did before?”

Master Xuyan shook his head again, “The second young master’s malevolent energy has grown stronger. Even if you keep your distance, it might not have a significant effect. Here’s what you can do: I have a spiritual jade here. Madam Du can give it to Second Young Master Yan. It will help suppress the malevolent energy.”

He extended his hand, and in his palm lay a white oval-shaped jade that had been intricately carved. While white jade was common, this one had five small, round, pure black dots on it, each the size of a fingernail. If these five dots were connected with lines, they formed a pentagon, which was very strange.

“Thank you, Master!” Du Rulan expressed her gratitude and extended her hands, carefully taking the spiritual jade. She vaguely saw a silver thread flash across each of the five black dots, but when she looked again, there was nothing. She dismissed it, thinking it was a reflection from the outside light.

As they parted, Du Rulan inadvertently forgot her handbag.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had finished sightseeing and trying local snacks in Province S, and then went to try the meat-filled buns. The pork filling in the buns was a rich, soft, succulent, and flavorful shade of red.

Both of them agreed that it was worth the visit, a d they ended up eating three in a row, completely disregarding their image.

The owner of the meat bun shop was a young woman. She found Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen's demeanor quite attractive. Even eating a meat bun seemed different with them – taking small, deliberate bites while engaging in hushed conversations, it had an alternative kind of elegance, like a living advertisement. She held her phone sneakily, wanting to take a photo, but was afraid of being noticed.

By the time she gathered the courage, both of them had finished their meat buns and were at the counter, saying they wanted to buy forty more to take away.

Huangfu Yuchen had already noticed that many girls in the queue were pretending to turn around but were actually sneaking glances at Yan Ge. His face turned cold, and he casually lifted his arm, seemingly unintentionally placing it around Yan Ge's shoulder. He knew that some of the attention was directed at him too.

Yan Ge turned his head, raised his left hand, and extended his index finger to cover Huangfu Yuchen's eyes, signaling him not to look. At the same time, he glanced sideways, implying that he shouldn't pay attention to it.

Huangfu Yuchen's lips curled slightly and the sourness in his heart dissipated a bit. He pinched Yan Ge's ear as his hand rested on his shoulder.

Their interaction successfully diverted most of the onlookers' attention. However, a few girls seemed even more excited and thrilled, leaving others baffled.

After buying the meat buns, the two of them headed to the parking lot.

—'*Horseshoes point south, people look north, gazing at green grass and rising yellow dust…*'

Yan Ge pulled out his phone from his pocket. The caller ID said—"Mom."

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at the screen and opened the car door, indicating for Yan Ge to take the passenger seat.

Yan Ge answered the call.

“Come home for dinner tonight.”

Huangfu Yuchen was helping Yan Ge fasten his seatbelt when he heard Du Rulan’s casual, commanding tone through the phone and his eyes darkened.

Yan Ge said, “I’m out of town.”

“Out of town?” Du Rulan frowned and looked at the spiritual jade in her hand. She was about to urge Yan Ge to come back today, but worried that he might become guarded. So she softened her voice, sounding gentle, “Are you on a trip? Take care and come back safely. When will you be back?”

The unusually gentle tone made Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen raise their eyebrows simultaneously.

“Next Tuesday,” Yan Ge said.

Du Rulan, “Okay, come over next Tuesday evening for dinner, okay? Do you have time?”

“Come over,” not “come back.” Yan Ge’s heart lacked any fluctuations with her attitude. “Alright.”

The call ended with Du Rulan’s clearly relieved tone, “Alright, I won’t affect your fun.”

As soon as Yan Ge hung up, Huangfu Yuchen decided, “I’ll go with you then.” He wanted to see what the Yans were up to.

Yan Ge chuckled, “Don’t be so tense. Do you think they could harm me?”

Huangfu Yuchen ruffled Yan Ge’s hair. Yan Ge had suffered this treatment for over twenty years. But now, he had him, and he wouldn’t allow anyone to hurt him.

“Let’s go,” Huangfu Yuchen started the car.

The two of them enjoyed their trip until Tuesday morning before driving back to the capital. With their profound cultivation, they didn’t feel tired, so they took a shower together upon their return.

Yan Ge’s slender yet strong figure fascinated Huangfu Yuchen. Under the pretense of helping to wash his back, Huangfu Yuchen pulled him into an embrace. As they rubbed against each other, they ended up hugging tightly….

Seeing that it was still early, they slept for a while before getting up, getting ready, and heading to the Yan residence.

Everyone from the Yan family was present.

Due to traffic, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were about fifteen minutes late. Surprisingly, Du Rulan greeted them with a warm smile, showing no signs of displeasure. When she saw Huangfu Yuchen, there was no hint of unhappiness on her face either.

Yan Jianqiang was also calm, as if the incident at the supermarket had never occurred.

“Second Brother, Mr. Huangfu, come and sit,” Yan Weifeng invited.

Only Yan Yan still seemed to dislike Yan Ge, giving him several resentful glances.

Yan Si approached Yan Ge with familiarity, smiling as he called out “Second Uncle”, and then hugged his leg. He glanced curiously at Huangfu Yuchen but didn’t show any fear, tilting his head back to observe him.

Yan Ge smiled and ruffled his hair, exchanging an affectionate glance with him before patting his head.

“Mr. Yan, Mrs. Yan, sorry to bother you. This is a small gift as a token of respect,” Huangfu Yuchen spoke up, presenting the gift boxes on the coffee

table. Even though the Yan family hadn't treated Yan Ge well, they couldn't afford to be discourteous and risk being looked down upon.

Yan Jiaqiang said, "You're considerate. Please sit. You're our guest."

After a smooth meal, everyone moved to the living room.

Du Rulan retrieved several gift boxes from under the tea table. Yan Ge glanced at them and counted five in total.

Du Rulan took the top one and handed it to Yan Ge. "This is a blessed jade that I had consecrated at the temple. Each of you children will have one to carry with them. While it may not necessarily be effective, it's for peace of mind."

Yan Yan moved closer with curiosity, "Mom, which one is mine?"

"Here." Du Rulan smiled and gave one to Yan Yan. She distributed the other three to Yan Weifeng, Zhang Qiaoqiao, and Yan Si.

Yan Yan immediately opened the box, liking the gift. This jade was valuable, at least twenty to thirty thousand. His mother was quite generous. However, he soon pouted. Since it was a collective gift, Yan Ge's surely couldn't be worse.

With a mischievous smile, Yan Yan looked at Yan Ge and extended his hand to snatch the box from him. "Second Brother, let me admire your peace jade."

Yan Ge chuckled lightly, "Of course." He had intentionally let Yan Yan snatch it. Otherwise, with his abilities, how could Yan Yan possibly take something from his hands?

Huangfu Yuchen noticed a flicker of unease in Du Rulan's eyes. It seemed she was nervous. He became cautious and looked at the gift box in Yan Yan's hand. 'Could there be something unusual about the jade inside?'

Yan Yan opened the box, and his eyes lit up. He took the jade from the box, looking reluctant to put it down. "What a beautiful jade! Second Brother,

can we trade?”

Yan Jiaqiang and Yan Weifeng were somewhat surprised. The jade was indeed exquisite. They looked at Du Rulan, puzzled.

Before Yan Ge could speak, Du Rulan scolded Yan Yan, “What are you trying to do by trading? Aren’t they all the same?” She snatched the jade back and returned it to the box. Realizing she had overreacted, she changed her expression, speaking gently to Yan Yan, “This jade might be slightly more beautiful than the others, but they all have the same properties. Your second brother was missing for two years. It’s only fair for me to compensate him. Yan Yan, listen to me.”

Yan Ge smiled slightly, not saying anything.

Yan Yan’s eyes were still on the box, a hint of reluctance in his expression. “Since they all have the same properties, what’s the harm in trading? Mom, if you’ve given it to Second Brother, it’s his. And Second Brother hasn’t said he doesn’t want to trade with me. Second Brother, shall we exchange?”

Yan Ge nodded with a smile, “Alright.”

Du Rulan’s face turned serious as she slapped Yan Yan’s shoulder, scolding sharply, “Yan Yan, wjy don’t you understand anything? It’s just a piece of jade. I compensated your second brother, and you’re causing trouble.”

Her slap was not gentle at all and Yan Yan’s eyes reddened instantly. He realized that crying like this would be embarrassing, and he abruptly stood up, dashing upstairs to his room, and forcefully slamming the door shut.

Du Rulan glanced at the second floor with worry, then turned her head, smiling gently at Yan Ge and saying warmly, “Remember to keep it close to you. It will bless you with safety.”

“Thank you, Mom. It’s getting late, and I have to go back with Yuchen.”

“Alright,” Du Rulan nodded, “Drive safely.”

As soon as Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen got into the car, Huangfu Yuchen took out the jade, trying to sense its energy fluctuations. He paused for a moment, put the jade back into the box, and then took it out again.

“Baby, this jade is unusual,” Huangfu Yuchen said, “When you don’t touch it, you can’t feel its energy fluctuations, but when you touch it, you can sense it clearly.”

“Where did she get something like this?” Yan Ge asked as he reached out. He was nervous, afraid that there might be something strange about the jade. What if something happened to Yuchen when he touched it?

Huangfu Yuchen pushed away Yan Ge’s hand, “She gave it to you, so it’s bound to be unusual. Don’t touch it for now.”

“Are you alright?” Yan Ge quickly scanned Huangfu Yuchen.

“I’m fine.” Huangfu Yuchen was afraid that Yan Ge would touch the jade, so he held it in his hand. “Let’s talk about it after we get back.”

Seeing Huangfu Yuchen’s expression, Yan Ge knew that he wouldn’t give it to him, so he could only start the car.

Back at the villa, the two of them sat in the living room to examine the jade.

Yan Ge reached out, but Huangfu Yuchen slapped his hand away, giving him a stern look.

Huangfu Yuchen contemplated. If Du Rulan was really up to something, and this attempt failed, there might be another one. He needed to find out what was going on. Moreover, with Yan Ge by his side, he could intervene in time if anything happened. Thinking of this, he handed the jade to Yan Ge.

Yan Ge held out his hand, and the jade fell into his palm. His keen eyes caught a silver thread-like gleam flashing from the five black dots, and a strange feeling passed through his mind. Although it was difficult to put

into words, it was definitely unsettling. He instinctively let go of the jade, and it dropped onto the carpet.

Huangfu Yuchen quickly placed his hand over Yan Ge's, asking with concern, "Are you okay?"

Yan Ge shook his head, frowning at the jade on the carpet, "I'm fine. It's just that this thing really doesn't feel right, it's very strange."

Huangfu Yuchen's expression turned cold. What exactly was Du Rulan trying to do?

"Don't overthink it. Let's have someone investigate whether there were any strange actions on the days when Du Rulan called you and the two days before. Besides, tomorrow is the cultivator exchange meeting. Let's bring this jade along. Wang Zhiyuan is a local after all, so he might know what's going on with this jade."

"Yeah, I'll make the call." Yan Ge took a few steps, then turned back to instruct, "Yuchen, don't touch it directly again."

"Rest assured." Huangfu Yuchen used the lid of the gift box to cover the jade, sealing it once more.

Yan Ge had dealt with detective agencies before when he started his company. He searched for the phone number online, made the call, offered a high price, and asked them to investigate Du Rulan's whereabouts on the day she called him.

On the other hand, Huangfu Yuchen called Ji Chang, asking him to deliver the invitation letter to them early the next morning.

The two temporarily set the matter aside, washed up, and went to bed.

Ji Chang had initially thought that there was no hope for Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen to attend the cultivator exchange meeting, and he was pleasantly surprised when he got the call and readily agreed. Afterward, he called Old Wang.

Wang Zhiyuan was also delighted and told Ji Chang to treat Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen with extreme courtesy.

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A little after 7 o’clock, Ji Chang brought over the invitation letter.

Yan Ge looked at it and saw that the time for the exchange meeting was 7 o’clock in the evening.

Around 6 o’clock in the evening, the two of them headed out and spotted Ji Chang’s car parked on the side of the road.

“Mr. Huangfu, Mr. Yan,” Ji Chang quickly walked over.

“Have you been here all along or did you leave and come back?” Yan Ge was curious. Wang Zhiyuan’s courteous behavior towards him and Yuchen was intriguing.

Ji Chang was handsome and carried an air of sophistication. When he smiled, two shallow dimples appeared on his face, giving him a slight Burmese appearance. However, his personality was not shy but rather lively. “I arrived a little after 5. I came specifically to pick you both up but if you prefer to drive yourselves, I can guide you.”

His enthusiasm wasn’t annoying, and Yan Ge nodded, “Since that’s the case, please take us.”

“Alright, please get in.”

The three of them got into the car, and the vehicle smoothly headed downhill.

Yan Ge inquired, “Mr. Ji, how many cultivators are participating in this exchange meeting?”

Ji Chang responded, “Mr. Yan, you can just call me Ji Chang. Actually, the main activity of this exchange meeting is an auction, facilitating the exchange of cultivation resources among cultivators. We’ve sent out over a hundred invitation letters in total. As for how many people will actually attend, that’s uncertain.”

This was easy to understand. Some cultivators preferred solitary cultivation and might not want to show themselves in public. Some might even send their disciples or students in their place. According to Ji Chang’s explanation, it seemed that the number of cultivators in the country was indeed not large.

—’Horseshoes point south, people look north, gazing at green grass and rising yellow dust…’

“Hello.” Yan Ge saw the phone number and signaled to Huangfu Yuchen. It was the detective agency calling.

Huangfu Yuchen leaned close together to listen to the call.

Ji Chang, who was at the driver’s seat, kept his focus on driving.

“Mr. Yan, we’ve found out that Du Rulan visited the Mo’an Temple and met with the abbot there, Master Xuyan. She stayed inside for over half an hour. When she entered, she was carrying a bag filled with something, but when she left, her hands were empty. Additionally, on the same afternoon, she bought four pieces of jade from the Jinxin Jade Shop.”

“Are you sure it’s four pieces?” Yan Ge asked.

The voice on the other end replied confidently, “Yes, we’re sure.”

“Got it. I’ll transfer the remaining payment within ten minutes.”

“Alright, goodbye. Feel free to contact us if you need anything in the future.”

After hanging up, Huangfu Yuchen sent a voice transmission, “It seems that this jade is connected to that Master Xuyan.”

After Yan Ge completed the transfer, he relaxed against Huangfu Yuchen and searched his memory, “Master Xuyan? I think I’ve heard of him. They say he’s a highly respected monk who’s skilled in divination. Many people line up to have him read their fortunes.”

Huangfu Yuchen held his hand but didn’t say much. Suspicion and caution had crept into his heart regarding Master Xuyan. He would go meet him after the exchange meeting.

Ji Chang’s car entered the flow of traffic, gliding into the city center amid shimmering neon lights, and finally stopping at the entrance of a large hotel.

“Mr. Huangfu, Mr. Yan, we’re here.” Ji Chang got out of the car and led the way. “Please come in.”

The three of them entered the lobby and took the elevator to the fifth-floor banquet hall.

The banquet hall was filled with people, all dressed in suits and elegant attire. They held wine glasses, engaged in quiet conversations. It resembled a business gathering.

Ji Chang noticed their curiosity and whispered an explanation, “This exchange meeting is being held in the form of a business gathering. Cultivators aren’t very willing to interact with ordinary people and usually adopt disguised identities. So, this event is like hiding in plain sight. There’s an unspoken understanding not to reveal each other’s identities among cultivators.”

Yan Ge nodded in understanding, and surveyed the room. Among the attendees were regular people and cultivators, mostly at the Divine Transformation stage and below. It appeared that the scarcity of spiritual energy on Earth still heavily influenced the cultivators. Or perhaps, those with higher cultivation levels were avoiding public appearances.

Ruan Mingwei, He Hong, and Zhang Jian were conversing with others not far away and occasionally glancing toward the entrance. On seeing Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, they excused themselves and walked over briskly.

“Mr. Huangfu, Mr. Yan.”

Seeing the respect for Huangfu Yuchen in their eyes, Yan Ge’s lips curled up. They planned to stay on Earth for a few more years and it was impossible not to interact with anyone. He was pleased to see that Yuchen had quickly established his own network of connections.

Huangfu Yuchen appraised the three and nodded, “Indeed, your cultivation is much more stable than the last time we met.”

“Thank you for your guidance, Mr. Huangfu,” Ruan Mingwei said with a smile.

Huangfu Yuchen responded lightly, “It was a small effort. There’s no need to mention it again in the future.”

A waiter passed by, and He Hong offered Yan Ge a glass of red wine. “Mr. Yan, try the wine here.” While they hadn’t witnessed Yan Ge’s abilities, they were certain that he was stronger than them. So, they didn’t overlook him to avoid seeming disrespectful.

“Thank you.” Yan Ge took the red wine and took a sip.

Zhang Jian whispered, “The official exchange meeting will start for a little while.”

Yan Ge nodded secretly. These four were also good in social situations.

Other cultivators in the hall noticed Ji Chang and his group’s unusual attitude toward the two strangers. They glanced over with curiosity, their eyes landing on Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. They couldn’t tell that the two were cultivators, yet there was a sense of intrigue. If they weren’t cultivators, why would Ji Chang’s group treat them with such respect?

“Yan Ge, Huangfu, you’re here too?”

Xu Kai’s voice sounded from behind.

Yan Ge heard the tone in his voice and knew that what he really meant to say was, “What are you doing here?” Xu Kai probably felt that asking that way was inappropriate and changed his words.

Yan Ge turned around and looked at the well-dressed young man, smiling, “Why? If Young Master Xu can come, why can’t we?”

Seeing that they had encountered an acquaintance, Ji Chang and his group tactfully moved away.

“Where else would I be? I got too excited when I saw you guys,” Xu Kai said in amusement. He was genuinely surprised. This gathering was a business event, attended by high-ranking individuals. Yan Ge wasn’t well-received in his family, and his once flourishing company was nolonger under his management, so technically, he wasn’t qualified to be here.

‘Could it be that he was here with Huangfu Yuchen?’ Xu Kai had inquired about Huangfu Yuchen from Yan Ge before, and Yan Ge had only given vague responses, which showed that there was more to it. But he didn’t probe further. He and Yan Ge were good friends. If there was something Yan Ge knew, he would definitely let him know.

Yan Ge pointed to a distance and said in a joking tone, “We came for some food. How about you?”

Xu Kai chuckled, “I doubt that. I saw the photos your boyfriend posted on Weibo. You guys went on a car trip to S Province. Your life is truly one to envy.”

“When in high spirits, one should indulge. You can do it too.” Yan Ge patted his shoulder, “We plan to visit Y Province mext time.”

Huangfu Yuchen added, “And then C Province after Y.”

‘These two were just teasing.’ Xu Kai shook his head helplessly, “Seriously, don’t you guys plan to do something productive?”

Yan Ge spread his hands, “We haven’t thought that far ahead. My first plan is to travel around the country with Yuchen. There are so many famous places to see; even if we visit them all, it’ll take two to three months. We’ll see what comes next. Yuchen, do you have any thoughts?”

Huangfu Yuchen hugged Yan Ge’s shoulder, “Starting a farm might be nice.”

Xu Kai’s mouth twitched. A farm? If he remembered correctly, one of the Yan family’s industries included a mansion. Farms and mansions were essentially similar. Was Huangfu Yuchen being deliberate. Was his purpose to stand up for Yan Ge?

Yan Ge’s lips curled up, not saying anything. The softness in his eyes indicated he enjoyed Huangfu Yuchen’s doting.

Xu Kai felt like he was being blinded ny their actions.

At that moment, Ji Chang and his group walked over. “Mr. Huangfu, Mr. Yan.”

Xu Kai took the initiative and said, “You guys go ahead.”

Yan Ge replied, “Alright, we’ll talk another day.”

Xu Kai watched as Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen followed Ji Chang through a side entrance at the banquet hall. He also discreetly observed the others who entered through that same door. He had noticed that Yan Ge had changed a lot compared to before, which is why he decided to observe these people.

To his surprise, he found that each one of them was either a prominent figure in the business world or a well-known name. Why had Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen suddenly gotten so close to these individuals?

Once Yan Ge and the rest entered the side door, they passed through a corridor and turned into another hall, which was the auction hall.

Wang Zhiyuan was in conversation with two middle-aged men in their forties. When he saw Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, he nodded slightly but didn't approach them.

This move was in line with Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen's intentions. Wang Zhiyuan held a special position, and they didn't want to attract too much attention to them.

Huangfu Yuchen sent a voice transmission to Wang Zhiyuan's spiritual realm, "Mr. Wang, the two of us would like to seek your advice on a matter later on. Would you be available?"

Wang Zhiyuan also sent a message, "Hehe, of course, I'm available. It would be my honor to help you both. I assume you two didn't want to draw attention, so I didn't come over to personally greet you. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. It suits our intentions." Huangfu Yuchen replied casually.

After everyone had settled down quietly, the interior lighting became brighter.

Yan Ge looked around and saw no cultivators at the Golden Core stage or above.

Before long, the auctioneer took the stage and picked up the microphone. "Fellow cultivators, if you have items you wish to auction, please register promptly. The official auction will commence in ten minutes."

A few people began to register one after another.

Exactly ten minutes later, the auction officially started.

The auctioneer was very professional. After a brief opening statement, he went straight to the point without any unnecessary words and presented the first item up for auction.

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Several individuals dressed in matching attire went around distributing auction brochures to everyone.

“Lot number one- a top-grade Spirit Stone weighing 1305 grams. As we all know, we cultivators absorb spiritual energy not only from heaven and earth but also from items rich in it, with the most effective being Spirit Stones. The spiritual energy within a Spirit Stone is more refined than that of the heaven and earth’s, and absorption is faster. This Spirit Stone weighs 1305 grams, and I believe its effects need no further elaboration,” the auctioneer explained in a brief and concise manner.

Below, many people had eager expressions, ready to bid.

“Starting price for the top-grade Spirit Stone is 1 million, with each subsequent bid no less than 100,000.”

Yan Ge turned to Huangfu Yuchen, a smile in his eyes. If they were to auction their own Spirit Stones, they would become millionaires or even billionaires.

Huangfu Yuchen put his arm around Yan Ge. Money wasn’t an issue for them. Whether it was the Foundation Establishment pills or the Spirit Stones, each item was precious.

But thinking about it, Yan Ge didn’t want to avoid being pursued.

Other cultivators had already begun to bid eagerly, “1.1 million.”

“1.2 million!”

“1.3 million!”

“1.4 million!”

…

Finally, the Spirit Stone was sold to a woman for 2 million.

The second item for auction was ten Spirit Gathering Talismans. These talismans were also valuable, as they could accelerate the absorption of spiritual energy during cultivation. They were sold for 1.1 million each.

The third item was a Nascent Infant Pill, most suitable for cultivators about to enter the Nascent Soul stage. It started at 2 million and was eventually sold for a high price of 3.2 million, which caused a sensation.

Yan Ge observed the expressions of the people around and noticed that their surprise wasn’t due to the 3.2 million price, but rather the rarity of cultivators approaching the Nascent Soul stage.

However, the bidder was only at the Early Foundation Establishment stage, so it was clear that they were just acting as a proxy. The real buyer for the Nascent Infant Pill wasn’t present.

…

After looking for a while, most items were unremarkable to Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. They could acquire most of what they needed through the system store and weren’t interested in competing with other cultivators.

In the end, they didn’t purchase anything. However, they gained a general understanding of the cultivators present and the families and factions they were associated with.

During the event, Ji Chang relayed a message from Old Wang, asking them to stay for a while longer.

After the auction ended, Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, and Old Wang got into Ji Chang’s car.

“Mr. Huangfu, Mr. Yan.” Wang Zhiyuan greeted them with his hands clasped together. “I wonder if there’s anything I can assist you with?”

Huangfu Yuchen appreciated his straightforwardness and handed him the gift box containing the strange jade. “Could you see if there’s anything unusual about this jade? I felt a strange fluctuation inside it before, but now it’s gone, and I don’t sense any danger.”

Wang Zhiyuan accepted the gift box with both hands and, upon opening it, gently picked up the jade. Seeing the five black dots on the jade’s surface, his expression changed subtly. “This seems to be… wait a moment.”

He then infused a strand of his true qi into the jade. The energy within the jade once again fluctuated.

Both Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen frowned.

A sense of shock flashed across Wang Zhiyuan’s face. He explained in detail to them, “Esteemed seniors, this jade contains an array called the Five-Point Control Array. It’s a very malicious formation that contains a demon cultivator’s true qi and records the birth details of the intended victim. This jade is only effective on cultivators, and it poses no threat as long as it’s not worn close to the body. However, if worn for forty-nine days, the person will inevitably weaken and die without any discernible cause. If it weren’t for my special status and having access to the most information, I wouldn’t have known about this.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s hold on Yan Ge’s hand tightened subconsciously, as if afraid he would disappear at any moment.

It turned out to be a demon cultivator’s true qi. Ever since they had entered the world of cultivation, they had never come into contact with demon cultivators, so they didn’t recognize the tainted true qi of a demon cultivator.

Yan Ge also felt a chill down his spine. The reason he and Yuchen dared to touch the jade was mainly that neither of them had shown any adverse

reactions. But they hadn’t anticipated that this jade would harbor such a malicious secret.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen exchanged a glance, both thinking the same question: Did Du Rulan know that this jade wasn’t a safeguard but a danger to Yan Ge?

Thinking about Du Rulan’s reaction when he took the jade, their hearts sank.

A glint of killing intent flashed in Huangfu Yuchen’s eyes as he asked, “How could recording someone’s birth details harm the person whose birth details are recorded?”

Wang Zhiyuan explained, “Think of it like each person having a unique magnetic field. Recording their birth details in the jade makes the jade’s ‘magnetic field’ align with the wearer’s. The Five-Point Control Array then uses this as a medium to attack the wearer. As for why you don’t feel any danger, that’s the terrifying aspect of this formation. It causes harm imperceptibly.”

Seeing the expressions on Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen’s faces, he guessed something but refrained from asking further. “As long as the jade isn’t worn close to the body, nothing will happen.”

“Thank you.” Huangfu Yuchen took out a small vial from his storage ring and handed it to Wang Zhiyuan. “This is called the Soul-Returning Pill. It can save a life as long as there’s a breath remaining. I also refined it. It’s a bit bitter in taste but just as effective.”

Wang Zhiyuan was taken aback. He tried to decline, his tone solemn, “Both of you have saved my life. How could I accept something so valuable? Please take it back.”

Huangfu Yuchen was firm. “You recognizing this formation is also a favor to both me and Xiao Ge.”

Wang Zhiyuan didn’t immediately understand his words, but he suddenly saw their intertwined hands and understood.

“Mr. Wang, please accept it.” Yan Ge smiled.

Through this incident, Wang Zhiyuan realized that both of them were straightforward people and were interested in forming a close relationship. Since there would be more interactions between them in the future, he accepted the pill. “In that case, I’ll gratefully accept.”

“Farewell.” Huangfu Yuchen pulled Yan Ge out of the car.

Wamg Zhiyuan watched the two gradually move away and disappear in the dazzling lights of the street lamps and neon lights, once again exclaiming at their extraordinary cultivation.

At this point, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were in the air.

“Baby, where’s the Mo’an Temple?”

“This way.” Yan Ge also wanted to see who was putting in so much effort to deal with him. This matter puzzled him greatly; back when he crossed over, he was just an ordinary person and hadn’t offended anyone, let alone provoke demon cultivators.

Silently flying forward through the night, the city’s twinkling lights below resembled stars in the sky. Feeling the gentle breeze and the warmth of the hand he held, Yan Ge’s heart calmed down. He smiled and said to Huangfu Yuchen, “Running a farm sounds pretty good.”

A cold gleam passed through Huangfu Yuchen’s eyes, but his tone was gentle. “Baby, leave the farm to me.”

“Alright.” Yan Ge playfully leaned against his shoulder. “I’ve been busy in the Great Han Kingdom for so long. Now it’s my turn to take a break. I’ll be relying on you to support me from now on.”

“No problem.” Huangfu Yuchen held his hand and gave it a kiss, then looked at a tall silhouette in the shadows ahead. “Is that it?”

He had caught a unique aura.

“Yes.” Yan Ge’s lips curled with a hint of coldness.

In an instant, they teleported and appeared in the Mo’an Temple, and then started walking directly towards the source of the aura.

The temple was lit by lanterns. The lights swayed gently, causing the shadows of the buildings to dance along.

A young monk holding a broom walked over, and upon seeing the two, he paused and clasped his hands together. “Honored patrons, the temple is already closed. Perhaps you could return tomorrow.”

Yan Ge didn’t want to trouble innocent people, so he spoke calmly, “We’re here to see Xuyan.”

The young monk replied serenely, “The abbot is currently in seclusion. Please return another day.”

“Seclusion? Is he there?” Huangfu Yuchen sneered. He nonchalantly placed his left hand behind his back while raising his right hand. With a swift motion, a fierce palm wind struck a courtyard a hundred meters away.

The gust of wind suddenly rose, and then halted after some point—Huangfu Yuchen had no intention of alarming unrelated bystanders, so he directed his attack only at the courtyard. People outside the courtyard wouldn’t hear any commotion.

The young monk stared at Huangfu Yuchen with an odd expression.

The palm strike landed heavily on the courtyard’s wall, emitting a silvery light that vanished in an instant.

Unexpectedly, the courtyard remained completely undamaged!

It was protected by a formation.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen exchanged a glance, then flew up together, positioning themselves on the left and right of the courtyard and looking down.

There was no movement within the courtyard.

Yan Ge understood formations better than Huangfu Yuchen, so he suggested: “Yuchen, strike again.”

Huangfu Yuchen raised his hand and struck once more.

As the silver light flashed again, Yan Ge’s spiritual sense swiftly swept through the entire courtyard. In his spiritual sense, the courtyard transformed into a clear “skeleton,” and even the spirit stones used to set up the formation were clearly visible to him. He smiled faintly and without hesitation, struck a lamp post with his palm.

In an instant, the entire courtyard appeared to have its protective membrane torn away, becoming somewhat dimmer.

At the same time, a figure in yellow and red shot up from inside the house and rushed off into the distance.

Unexpectedly, a figure flew out from the shadows and dashed towards it head-on. Simultaneously, an invisible punch hit the escaping figure like a hundred-pound hammer.

Xuyan grunted and fell back to the ground, his round eyes gleaming with panic. He spoke in a deep voice, “Amitabha. I wonder why the two honored patrons are disturbing this old monk’s meditation?”

The one who had struck him was Huangfu Yuchen. At the sound of his words, Huangfu Yuchen sneered, and without any hesitation, delivered another palm strike.

Xuyan’s wide build contrasted with his agility. He rose like a flying swallow, evading nimbly to the right. A hint of disdain flashed in his eyes as he looked at Huangfu Yuchen.

Unexpectedly, the palm strike from Huangfu Yuchen seemed to have a mind of its own. It suddenly changed direction and struck from behind. With a loud “bang,” it landed on Xuyan’s back.

Master Xuyan couldn’t believe his eyes, and blood trickled from his mouth.

Just as he was about to escape, Huangfu Yuchen flew over and stood in front of him. His gaze was as if he were looking at a dead man.

A white shadow flashed over, and a new figure stood before Xuyan.

Yan Ge fixed his gaze on Xuyan, and he spoke slowly, “You should recognize me.”

Xuyan saw his face clearly and was taken aback. In that instant, his eyes showed surprise, confusion, and doubt, as if he felt that Yan Ge shouldn’t have found him, and certainly not so quickly.

Huangfu Yuchen saw it all clearly. He stepped forward and gripped Xuyan’s chin with his left hand, while his right palm landed on his mouth, inserting something into it.

Xuyan’s jaw was lifted slightly, and he subconsciously swallowed whatever was given to him, which made him panic. “What have you given me?!”

Yan Ge smiled playfully. “It’s the same jade you gifted me. How does it taste?” After saying that, he tapped a few acupoints on Xuyan’s body.

“Only I can undo your acupoints. As long as I don’t undo them, you won’t be able to force the jade out. I wonder what will happen after forty-nine days?”

A chill flashed through Xuyan’s eyes as they darted left and right, seeking an opportunity to escape.

“Speak! Why did you target Xiao Ge?” Huangfu Yuchen questioned coldly.

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Xuyan took a step back.

Huangfu Yuchen's voice lacked any warmth. "It seems you want me to use soul-searching on you." Xuyan's face filled with horror as he stared at him in disbelief.

'Soul-searching technique—had these two individuals reached such a level of cultivation?' Soul-searching caused immense harm to the target, ranging from partial paralysis to the complete destruction of one's cultivation.

Huangfu Yuchen slowly approached Xuyan, and each step felt like a heavy hammer striking Xuyan's heart. The immense pressure was like the sky before a storm, with dark clouds looming.

Xuyan had to believe that Huangfu Yuchen truly had that ability! Fear showed on his face. "I'll talk, I'll talk."

Both Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen stood expressionlessly, waiting for him to start.

Sweat covered Xuyan's face, his whole body shrinking in fear. He appeared completely different from the dignified Grandmaster before. "In recent years, the spiritual energy on Earth has been diminishing. For us cultivators, this is a desperate situation. All cultivators are trying to obtain spiritual energy, but it's not easy. I'm no exception. Being skilled in divination, I came up with a plan to accumulate wealth in the temple through fortune-telling, and then buy objects with spiritual energy from the mundane world. About twenty-eight years ago, Du Rulan's second son was born…" Xuyan's voice grew lower.

Yan Ge vaguely guessed what happened, and he frowned.

Huangfu Yuchen held his waist, commanding coldly, “Continue.”

Xuyan hastened to speak, “The couple brought their child to me for a divination. I calculated the child’s fate and unexpectedly discovered that he had potential for cultivation. But the divination also showed something strange—his fate was changeable. If no one interfered, he would live a smooth life, with harmony in his family and success in his career, but he wouldn’t achieve greatness in cultivation. However, if someone intervened, he would experience an inexplicable encounter at the age of twenty-five. I couldn’t foresee what the encounter was, but he would achieve great cultivation because of it. Moreover, his birth date and time are almost identical to mine. I thought at that moment, Isn’t this an opportunity for me to take over his body…”

‘Take over his body!’ Huangfu Yuchen wished he could kill him on the spot.

“And then?” Yan Ge should have been angry, but his mood was unexpectedly calm.

Xuyan didn’t dare to look at him and continued in a low voice, “Then, I told Du Rulan that this child would affect the fortune of the Yan family’s enterprise. Du Rulan suggested that since the problem was so severe, they should just send the child away. Yan Jiaqiang also agreed with her idea. But I stopped them because the child’s extraordinary encounter was linked to the daughter of a prestigious family. If they sent the child away, he might not have the chance to meet this daughter of a prestigious family…”

Yan Ge thought that the girl must be referring to Lu Yanyan. His crossing over was indeed connected to her.

“I wanted to tell them that sending the child away wouldn’t work. The only solution was for both of them not to get close to the child.” Xuyan stole a glance at Huangfu Yuchen. Sensing the murderous intent in his eyes, his heart trembled. “Second Young Master, your parents care more about the Yan family’s enterprise than you. They were willing to get rid of you. In a way, I saved your life…”

Before he finished his sentence, he suddenly shot up and dashed towards the distance like lightning.

“Trying to escape? It’s not that easy!” Huangfu Yuchen was faster than him, instantly catching up. He pursued like a shadow, and his palm surged with killing intent as it whistled through the air, creating waves of palm wind.

Xu Yan seemed to have anticipated his pursuit, and a dazzling black and red light burst forth from his body like a bomb exploding.

“Yuchen!” Yan Ge exclaimed in shock, moving to approach.

“Don’t come over!” Huangfu Yuchen seemed to have eyes in the back of his head, immediately stopping him. He quickly leapt back, narrowed his eyes, and imbued formidable true qi into his palms before swiftly charging towards Xuyan.

“Boom!” A loud explosion rang out, as if a small atomic bomb had detonated in mid-air, making the entire sky as bright as day.

Both Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen searched the area with their spiritual senses carefully, yet they couldn’t find any trace of Xuyan, nor could they sense even a trace of his presence.

Yan Ge asked uncertainly, “Did he die?”

Huangfu Yuchen shook his head. “The weapon he used just now has some tricks to it. Nevertheless, my attack was at full strength. Even if he’s not dead, his cultivation will regress to zero. He won’t pose much of a threat for the next seventy or eighty years.”

Yan Ge nodded, not saying a word.

Huangfu Yuchen gently pulled him into his embrace, caressing his back and saying softly, “Baby, I hate Xuyan, but I’m also grateful to him. If he hadn’t interfered with your fate, you wouldn’t have come to Great Han, and I wouldn’t have met you. Am I selfish and despicable for feeling this way?”

His arms around Yan Ge’s waist grew tighter. Yan Ge’s lips curled up. “Yes.”

Huangfu Yuchen’s heart sank. It felt as if an invisible hand had clenched around it, causing him intense pain. He abruptly released Yan Ge, cupping his face and harshly capturing his lips, passionately kissing and sucking.

Selfish or not? Despicable or not? He would never let go of Yan Ge in this lifetime!

Not sensing any resistance from his beloved, Huangfu Yuchen’s eyes opened, meeting a pair of smiling, pitch-black eyes. There was the same concern in his gaze, mixed with a hint of indulgence and a touch of teasing.

Huangfu Yuchen’s heart relaxed again. He opened his mouth, finally experiencing what it was like to feel like riding a roller coaster. He hugged his beloved back into his arms, playfully pinching his buttocks. “You did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

Yan Ge’s mood was unusually serene. Whether Du Rulan knew about the hidden killing formation within the jade or not didn’t matter anymore. For the sake of the Yan family’s enterprise, his parents were willing to suggest abandoning him. Perhaps he should be thankful that Xuyan didn’t tell them that he would harm his parents. Otherwise, he probably wouldn’t even have lived for another day. He had struggled so much in this world, but upon arriving in Great Han, he not only gained a caring lover, but also a warm family and friends. What more could he ask for?

He lifted his head and smiled at Huangfu Yuchen, his eyes clear and relaxed. “Let’s go home.”

“Alright.” Huangfu Yuchen smiled in response.

The two of them walked away together, ignoring the police cars and ambulances rushing towards Mo’an Temple below. After all, they had disguised themselves, so it was unlikely that anyone could find them from above.

Back home, they had a refreshing shower and lay comfortably on the soft bed.

Yan Ge rolled over and laid on top of Huangfu Yuchen, using him as a pillow. He held his phone in his right hand, scrolling through Weibo.

Huangfu Yuchen held Yan Ge's back, gazing at him with a smile. His eyes were full of tenderness. At this moment, he just wanted to hold his precious one tightly and feel his presence. Their legs touched and brushed against each other occasionally.

"Baby, I'll begin dealing with the matters of the farm starting tomorrow."

Yan Ge placed his phone on the bedside table, turned his head, and smiled softly. "I'll help you."

"Okay. But didn't you say you wanted a long vacation?" Huangfu Yuchen's right foot's big toe and second toe playfully trapped Yan Ge's toes.

"Running a farm sounds more interesting." Yan Ge tilted his chin up, his gaze playful. "Besides, my wife looks so handsome. I need to keep an eye on him."

A low chuckle emerged from Huangfu Yuchen's throat. "Then make sure to watch me closely."

"Should we start by selecting a location?" Yan Ge inquired.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. "Yes, but we should aim for something significant. Before that, I need to make a call to Wang Zhiyuan. Tomorrow, you should figure out a way to get more cash. We can use up the gold and silver treasures from Great Han. After all, we won't need them anymore."

"Alright." Yan Ge didn't ask further. He could tell Huangfu Yuchen was enthusiastic, and it was good to see him interested in something.

The next day, after breakfast, the two of them drove out energetically, each taking on a different task. Yan Ge went to exchange for cash, while Huangfu Yuchen made a phone call to Wang Zhiyuan.

“Mr. Huangfu, greetings.”

Huangfu Yuchen got straight to the point. “I want to make a deal with you regarding cultivation resources. However, it’s better if someone with decision-making power is present.”

Wang Zhiyuan immediately sat up straight, speaking with formality, “Understood. I’ll bring two others with me. Where should we meet?”

Huangfu Yuchen glanced out of the car window. “We can meet at the Wei Meiyuan restaurant on Yongwei Road.”

“Alright, we’ll be there in half an hour.”

Wang Zhiyuan, Liu Xianglong, and Zhang Youze rushed to the restaurant. They were about to ask the waiter about Huangfu Yuchen’s whereabouts when they saw a line made of condensed spiritual energy appear right before their eyes. Ordinary people couldn’t see it. Following the spiritual line, the three arrived in front of a private room.

Wang Zhiyuan was about to knock on the door when it swung open by itself. The dignified and aloof man was seated by the table, reclining casually against his chair as he looked toward the door.

“Mr. Huangfu, sorry to keep you waiting,” Wang Zhiyuan said.

‘So, this was Huangfu Yuchen.’ Liu Xianglong and Zhang Youze sized him up and nodded in appreciation.

Huangfu Yuchen glanced at their dantians. Both were at the late stage of the Divine Transformation stage.

He didn’t rise from his seat. “Gentlemen, please come in.”

Liu Xianglong and Zhang Youze followed the spiritual line and entered the room with Wang Zhiyuan, then closed the door behind them.

Wang Zhiyuan introduced, “Mr. Huangfu, allow me to make introductions. This is Mr. Liu Xianglong and Mr. Zhang Youze. Similar to my position,

they manage the cultivators from the undercover division.”

“Mr. Huangfu, it’s nice to meet you.” Liu Xianglong had a proper smile on his square face.

Zhang Youze was relatively quiet, merely nodding. However, his demeanor didn’t come across as cold.

Huangfu Yuchen shook hands with them and said, “Nice to meet you. Please have a seat.”

After Liu Xianglong sat down, he got straight to the point: “I wonder what Mr. Huangfu would like to discuss in terms of a trade?”

Huangfu Yuchen inwardly nodded. Liu Xianglong and Zhang Youze didn’t question his abilities, which indicated that they were both intelligent individuals.

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Huangfu Yuchen lifted the tea and took a sip, immediately getting straight to the point, “Xiao Ge and I have intentions to establish a farm in the capital. The farm will be enclosed by a large-scale gathering spirit array. At that time, the vegetables, fruits, and crops grown inside will possess spiritual energy…”

Before he could finish speaking, Wang Zhiyuan, Liu Xianglong, and Zhang Youze had already stood up in astonishment, staring at Huangfu Yuchen in shock, subconsciously ready to question if it was true.

However, being elders, the three of them quickly regained their composure. They sat back down, and waited for Huangfu Yuchen to continue.

Huangfu Yuchen was quite satisfied with their reactions. “Moreover, within the gathering spirit array, the spiritual energy within the plants will gradually form a complete cycle, sustaining perpetual growth. My request to you is not to interfere with the farm in the name of the country. Within a maximum of four years, Xiao Ge and I will leave. By that time, the farm, including its resources, will be gifted to the nation, which is to say, to all of you.”

The shock still lingered on the faces of Wang Zhiyuan, Liu Xianglong, and Zhang Youze.

Liu Xianglong and Zhang Youze quickly calculated in their minds. Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge would leave after four years. But if they could get such a large resource now, the overall strength of their secret team would be greatly improved…

Huangfu Yuchen observed their expressions and lightly added, “Have you considered why I’m telling you about this? I could very well establish the farm first, and anyone who has ill intentions can be directly kicked out when the time comes.”

Zhang Youze and Liu Xianglong were shaken, suddenly coming back to their senses and regretting their earlier confusion. Huangfu Yuchen’s strength far surpassed Wang Zhiyuan’s, and with the addition of Yan Ge, another individual with profound cultivation, these two individuals were even more formidable. Also, according to Wang Zhiyuan’s deductions, the peculiar explosion at the Mo’an Temple last night was highly likely to be connected to these two people. Could they afford to offend such individuals? The reason Huangfu Yuchen was straightforward about this matter was simply to avoid annoying troubles. If they still dared to entertain unwarranted thoughts in this situation, not only would they offend Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge, but they might even push the two experts into opposition against them. The consequences of such actions were beyond what they could handle. One more enemy was not as good as one more friend.

Once they had a clear understanding, Zhang Youze and Liu Xianglong’s expressions returned to normal, and they exchanged glances with Wang Zhiyuan.

Wang Zhiyuan nodded at the two, secretly relieved. Liu Xianglong and Zhang Youze had come to their senses, which was good. He was genuinely worried they might make a hasty and incorrect decision. If they really offended Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen under these circumstances, it would cause immense damage to the cultivation world of Huaxia.

Zhang Youze asked, “After the farm is established, cultivators will surely flock to it, requesting to practice inside. How does Mr. Huangfu plan to handle that?”

Huangfu Yuchen responded with a blend of indifference and authority, “They can come in for a meal, but practicing inside is not allowed.”

Wang Zhiyuan and the others exchanged a glance. This statement contained some room for interpretation, indicating that Huangfu Yuchen didn't intend to make things overly strict.

The four of them discussed a few more details, and the matter was settled.

After the main topic was discussed, Wang Zhiyuan enthusiastically said, "Mr. Huangfu, let's order some dishes first, then we can chat at our leisure."

"No need, I have other matters." Huangfu Yuchen stood up. "If there's something, I'll contact you."

Wang Zhiyuan and the others didn't want to insist, so they accompanied him to the door.

Watching Huangfu Yuchen's car leave, Wang Zhiyuan turned to Liu Xianglong and Zhang Youze, "Mr. Huangfu and that other gentleman are a couple. I've investigated the Yan family. The reason Mr. Huangfu wants to establish the farm is largely to stand up for Mr. Yan, so we don't need to provoke them. We just have to wait for four years."

"Zhiyuan, you can rest assured." Zhang Youze also came to understand. "Four years is four years."

Liu Xianglong also nodded. "This deal makes sense. We can wait."

As the three of them headed back, Zhang Youze looked at the night sky and said, "Four years might seem long, but in the cultivation world, it's really just a fleeting moment."

Liu Xianglong agreed, "Indeed, time passes quickly when you're focused on cultivation."

On the way home, Huangfu Yuchen made a trip to the supermarket and bought some fresh ingredients. After arriving home and not finding Yan Ge there, he called him, leaving his phone on the countertop before starting to prepare and wash the vegetables.

The call was quickly connected, and Yan Ge' cheerful voice came through, "Yuchen, are you done with your tasks?"

"Yeah, I just got home. How's it going on your end?"

"The quantity is too much, the fastest this can be finished is the day after tomorrow. I'm about to head back."

"There's no rush, a few more days won't hurt. We can use the time to find a suitable location." Huangfu Yuchen put the washed cucumbers onto a plate and started washing some greens.

"Are you washing vegetables?" Yan Ge asked with a mischievous tone in his voice.

Huangfu Yuchen could imagine the playful expression on his face as he spoke, and a smile tugged at his lips. "They're all your favorite dishes."

"I'll be there in half an hour."

"Drive safely."

After that, the two of them spent two days touring the entire capital, eventually settling on Fengshan. Almost all the developable areas in the capital had already been developed, and even the unused plots of land had owners. Fengshan was Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen's only viable choice.

However, the government's attitude toward Fengshan was unclear. Huangfu Yuchen called Wang Zhiyuan again, promising not to damage the precious tree species on the mountain and ensure no harm would come to the wildlife.

With that assurance, Wang Zhiyuan readily agreed to handle this matter. The spirit gathering array would benefit the forest on Fengshan.

In less than an hour, Wang Zhiyuan called back, confirming that the rights to use Fengshan would belong to Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen for the next ten years. He would send over the relevant documents and certificates as soon as possible.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen spent half a day flying over Fengshan to gain a better understanding of its terrain. Afterwards, they explored the mountain thoroughly, ensuring that all the precious trees and animals moved into Yan Ge's system backpack. They subsequently planned the entire farm and even enlisted a professional planner to draw up the design for Fengshan Farm.

Three days later, they contacted three renowned construction companies in the capital to begin the construction of the farm, or rather, the transformation of the mountain.

After finishing these tasks, they temporarily resided in Yan Ge's system backpack. After the Male Consort System upgraded to 100% capability, the backpack became an independent small world, teeming with vitality, abundant spiritual energy, harmonious landscapes, and diverse flora and fauna. The three-story ancient-style building on the island in the middle of the lake became their favorite place to stay. The wildlife transferred from Fengshan roamed around joyfully, clearly enjoying the environment. One remarkable feature of this space was the spring just behind the small building. The spring water not only refreshed the mind but also helped stabilize and enhance cultivation. Furthermore, it had an excellent nourishing effect on the forest. Huangfu Yuchen dared to transplant trees from Fengshan because he knew the spring water in their space would sustain them.

They spent much of their time cultivating within the system, and every three to five days, they would venture out to check the progress of the construction.

Wang Zhiyuan, Liu Xianglong, and Zhang Youze also attached importance to the farm. They arranged supervisors to oversee the construction to prevent any shortcuts, which relieved the burden on Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

With more people, there was more strength. Two months later, Fengshan Farm was completed.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen began hiring a large number of workers who would later be responsible for cultivating vegetables, managing the orchard,

growing crops, maintaining flower gardens, tending the forests, and more. Later, they transplanted seasonal flowers, vegetables, and fruit trees from various places. For example, grapes, watermelons, and peaches. While normally transplanted trees had a hard time surviving, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen's use of the spring water to irrigate the plants ensured that all the flora thrived and bloomed overnight.

Next, they spent over two thousand low grade spirit stones to set up a gathering spirit array. They chose a special formation that combined both spiritual accumulation and defensive properties. This array could accumulate spiritual energy while shielding against external attacks. If anyone wanted to enter the farm, they could only use the main entrance.

Furthermore, the concentration of spiritual energy in different areas of the farm varied. Ordinary people wouldn't be able to tolerate too strong spiritual energy. Consuming the vegetables and fruits grown in these areas would be sufficient for them.

With everything arranged, Yan Ge discreetly transferred the animals and plants back from the space to Fengshan Farm, letting them return to their original habitat. Although there were more people on Fengshan now, the animals couldn't bear to leave the abundant spiritual energy, so they chose to stay.

The farm would establish strict rules. It wouldn't allow theft of trees or harm to the wildlife. Moreover, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen specifically went into the primeval forests and captured harmless wild animals, using spiritual energy to help refine their meridians. To a certain extent, this increased their spiritual nature and ensured they wouldn't harm humans. Additionally, they attached small protective spirit stones to the animals' necks, guaranteeing they wouldn't be harmed by anyone with malicious intent.

Huangfu Yuchen intentionally didn't construct a parking lot but instead arranged for a dedicated public transit line from the city to Fengshan. If people wanted to visit the farm, they could only use the public bus.

Half a month later, Fengshan Farm opened quietly without any promotion.

Yan Ge invited Xu Kai, Yang Zhou, and other old friends. Xu Kai's group was full of enthusiasm, and they brought along many family and friends. They expressed a little annoyance, saying that Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge hadn't informed them in advance about the farm's establishment, so they didn't have the chance to help, and Yan Ge was made to drink several glasses of alcohol as punishment.

Huangfu Yuchen also invited Wang Zhiyuan and others, as well as a few businessmen he had met during the farm's establishment.

Wang Zhiyuan and the others had special status, so Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen arranged two courtyards for them in the farm—one for the leader to stay and another for the members of the covert operations team to practice.

Overall, on the day of the grand opening, the number of visitors wasn't substantial.

However, Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge weren't concerned. They sat at a table with Xu Kai and others and enjoyed the evening together.

After taking a bite of vegetables, Lu Hanya's eyes lit up. She took a few more bites and exclaimed, "This is amazing! I never thought cabbage could be cooked so deliciously. I've never had such tasty cabbage before."

Xu Kai watched his son m enjoying the food and laughed, "Looks like we need to come here to eat more often. You see, my son never eats vegetables, but today, he's just grabbing them."

Yang Zhou also couldn't stop eating. "Huangfu, Yan Ge, don't worry, we'll promote this place when we get back. I guarantee that tomorrow it will be packed. By the way, are the animals in the forest really not harmful? Tomorrow is Saturday, and I'm planning to bring my nephew to have some fun."

"Rest assured," Yan Ge assured. "As long as you don't provoke them, they won't harm anyone."

Huangfu Yuchen added, “I’ve prepared some fruits for you when you leave, feel free to take a basket.”

“No charges today?” He Xin joked.

Huangfu Yuchen spoke generously, “No. Later, I’ll give each of you a VIP card, and you’ll receive an 20% discount whenever you dine here.”

“That’s great then!” Xu Kai was the first to approve. With his large business, he often had to entertain guests for meals. Having a VIP card would make it much more convenient to bring guests here in the future.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen spent some time eating with them before heading to other courtyards to gauge the guests’ reactions.

Everyone who had tasted the fruits and vegetables from the farm couldn’t help but praise them, stating that this was what true green vegetables should taste like.

From then on, the reputation of Feng Farm gradually began to spread.

In just three days, the farm appeared on television and in newspapers. As the owner of Fengshan Farm, Yan Ge became well-known among the public.

Upon hearing that Yan Ge had established such a vibrant farm and that one of its special wines was the same kind he had once smelled in the Emerald Villa, Yan Jiaqiang was so furious that he nearly choked.

Du Rulan was even more infuriated, smashing her favorite bottle of perfume in anger.

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“Husband, I heard that Fengshan Farm doesn’t have a parking lot. Are we really going to squeeze into a bus with so many people?” Du Rulan picked up her handbag from the sofa and walked over to Yan Jiaqiang, linking her arm with his, her tone tinged with dissatisfaction.

Yan Jiaqiang didn’t agree. “Let’s take the car. I’m his father, could anyone dare to tow my car away?”

He went to the garage, fetched the car, and the two of them headed to Fengshan Farm.

Sitting in the car, Du Rulan grew more and more frustrated. Her delicate eyebrows furrowed tightly, adding a touch of sharpness to her already fierce appearance. In just a few days, most of the guests from Emerald Villa had switched to Fengshan Farm. Whenever she went out shopping with some other ladies, they couldn’t stop praising Fengshan Farm. Could she not feel annoyed? Moreover, there were many people waiting to see a joke about their Yan family: ‘Father has a villa, his son established a farm, and he didn’t even invite his father on the opening day. Wasn’t this a father-son showdown?’

Although Yan Jiaqiang was also frustrated, he managed to control his temper.

The car drove towards the outskirts, and onto Difeng Road which led to Fengshan. Yan Jiaqiang had heard that Difeng Road was built by Fengshan Farm’s co-owner, Huangfu Yuchen, and named by him as well.

Yan Jiaqiang’s feelings towards Huangfu Yuchen were quite complex. He even wondered if he would have objected to Haungfu Yuchen and Yan Ge’s

relationship if Fengshan Farm had been established before he knew about the relationship..

As they continued driving towards Fengshan Farm, Yan Jiaqiang saw three buses labelled “520 Nanyuan Intersection – Fengshan Farm”. Besides their car, there were two other private cars driving not far ahead, and not a single taxi was in sight.

Initially, many guests who used to visit farms for leisure didn’t pay much attention to the absence of a parking lot at Fengshan Farm. They used taxis to come, only to find out at the entrance that taxis were not allowed to pass the gate. So, they had to walk about three or four miles to reach the farm. Later, those who wanted to visit the farm grew wiser, giving up on driving or taking taxis and choosing to take the bus instead. The buses were air-conditioned, with 36 fixed seats, and aside from children under 1.4 metres tall, they didn’t allow sharing seats. The buses were kept clean and tidy, and were not necessarily less comfortable than private cars.

Yan Jiaqiang had a vague sense that something was off, but thinking that he was Yan Ge’s father, he would be able to enter. Yan Ge wouldn’t deny him that much face. So, the car continued towards Fengshan Farm.

After driving for another two miles, Du Rulan noticed a checkpoint ahead. Next to the checkpoint, there was a side road branching off Difeng Road that led back towards the capital city. The two private cars they had seen were parked by the roadside at this moment.

“Honey, look quickly.”

Yan Jiaqiang glanced over. The staff at the checkpoint only allowed the buses to pass while not permitting the private cars. The owners of the private cars got out and had a conversation with the staff, but the staff still didn’t allow their cars to enter.

The owners of the two private cars had to turn around and take the other road back.

“Don’t worry, dear, we can go in.”

The car reached the checkpoint. Xiao Liao, the staff member dressed in a white uniform, glanced at the sedan, inwardly amused by yet another self-important individual. Just now, someone claimed to be the chairman of a certain group, and now, who knows what kind of background this person has?

She quickly took a sip of water. It had been quite manageable these few days, but during the initial days, she had to deal with hundreds of private car owners every day who wanted to drive their cars into the farm. The two bosses were considerate of the staff and had placed a box of bottled water in the duty booth.

Yan Jiaqiang lowered the car window and politely said, “Miss, hello. I’m Mr. Yan’s father. Please raise the prohibition bar and let us in.”

“I’m sorry, sir, please look at the notice.” Xiao Liao pointed to the large-font notice posted on the duty booth.

Yan Jiaqiang’s brows furrowed, and he ordered, “Call your boss.”

Xiao Liao maintained her polite smile, “I’m sorry, sir. Our boss has stated that, unless there’s prior notice, no vehicles other than buses are allowed in. Please understand our work. Alternatively, would you like to call our boss personally?”

Yan Jiaqiang’s face reddened slightly. Even though there weren’t many people around, he still felt like he was being laughed at.

Du Rulan heard the whole conversation from inside the car, and her face became gloomy. She quickly dialled Yan Ge’s phone number.

“Yan Ge, your dad and I are stuck at the checkpoint and can’t get in.”

“You came by car, right?”

“Yes,” Du Rulan replied nonchalantly, “Tell the staff to let us in quickly.”

“The farm’s rules are like this, and we can’t make exceptions. Otherwise, turn around at the checkpoint and go back about two or three miles. There’s

an open space there for parking. I'm quite busy right now, so I'll hang up first."

Before Du Rulan could say anything else, the call was cut off.

Yan Jiaqiang glanced at her rigid expression, and his flushed face turned livid. He considered turning back, but then thought of today's purpose for coming. He swallowed his anger and took the road branching off.

He noticed Du Rulan's silence in the car but didn't say anything.

Du Rulan was feeling anxious. Yan Ge hadn't even called her "mom," and the tone he used while speaking to her was as if he were talking to a stranger. What was going on?

The car soon arrived at the open space Yan Ge had mentioned. Yan Jiaqiang's brows furrowed so tightly that he could have crushed a fly. The terrain was uneven, with many potholes, scattered with fragments of tiles and sand—definitely unsuitable for parking. Apart from their car, there was only one vehicle parked there.

Yan Jiaqiang immediately felt humiliated, as if Yan Ge had slapped him hard across the face. He, who considered himself Yan Ge's father, had expected to enjoy some prestige by driving in with everyone's admiring gazes, but Yan Ge had simply disregarded him.

Stepping out of the car, he slammed the car door harshly. "Get out! What are you still sitting there for?"

With that, he no longer paid attention to Du Rulan and walked away on his own.

"Husband, wait for me!" Du Rulan hastily opened the car door and got out. Her high-heeled shoe heel landed on a pebble, causing her to slip and almost stumble. A hint of impatience flashed in Yan Jiaqiang's eyes as he walked back and helped her up.

Both of them walked towards the villa, sweating profusely. A bus leisurely passed by them, emanating cheerful laughter from inside.

Yan Jiaqiang and Du Rulan felt as if those people were mocking them, and their faces burned.

“That ungrateful child! Is this how he repays us for raising him?” Du Rulan’s face darkened as she quickened her pace, eager to see Yan Ge and give him a good lesson.

Yan Jiaqiang paid her no attention.

After walking for nearly half an hour, they finally caught sight of the farm. Out of the corner of their eyes, they noticed there was actually a parking lot on the side. However, it was filled with buses, and there was another small parking lot with a sign that read “Employee Parking Only.”

As they approached, they observed the scene in front of them, and both of them were taken aback.

At the entrance of the farm was a heart-shaped lake, its water crystal clear, reflecting the blue sky. The water sparkled like a colorful blue gemstone, revealing colorful pebbles and water plants at the bottom. Fish of various colors swam around. A sturdy wooden arch bridge connected both sides of the lake. The railings of the bridge were entwined with lush green vines adorned with purple blossoms.

Along the lake, two wide roads paved with cobblestones led to the farm’s main entrance.

The farm’s main gate was also a wooden fence gate. The rustic brown color juxtaposed with the lively green trees, creating a naturally refreshing atmosphere.

One side gate of the gate was open, with a ticket booth next to it. Children under 1.4 meters received a half-price admission, while others paid the full price of 299 yuan. The ticket was for admission; other expenses had to be paid separately.

This time, Yan Jiaqiang didn’t mention his identity. He silently took out several hundred-yuan bills, got the tickets, and entered directly.

On the left wall of the entrance, a large screen played a short video introducing the farm, and on the right, there was a layout diagram of the entire farm, marking out the orchards, vegetable gardens, fish ponds, wheat fields, restaurants, shops, guesthouses, leisure areas, and restricted zones.

Du Rulan quickly scanned the area and asked, “Where would Yan Ge be? Let’s go find him directly.”

However, Yan Jiaqiang turned his head and walked towards the orchard.

Du Rulan could only follow, forcing herself not to mind Yan Jiaqiang’s indifference. She pondered privately how much longer it would take for the jade on Yan Ge to take effect.

Cameras were installed around the orchard to prevent wanton waste and intentional destruction. Looking around, each fruit tree bore heavy fruit—apples, pears, oranges, dates, and more—all densely clustered and highly appealing. In the orchard, many visitors brought their children, holding delicate baskets and enthusiastically picking various sweet fruits. At the entrance, staff members were responsible for weighing and settling payments.

Built against the mountain, the estate made skillful use of the Fengshan Mountain’s terrain. Yan Jiaqiang and Du Rulan had only toured half of it and were already quite tired.

It was already noon, so the two went to the restaurant and ordered several dishes.

Yan Jiaqiang tasted each dish and furrowed his brows once again.

Du Rulan’s expression also turned more serious. The food at this farm was much better than the cuisine at their Emerald Villa. Even simple stir-fried vegetables were satisfying. If this continued, there was no doubt that the Emerald Villa would inevitably go bankrupt.

“Husband, I think we should talk to Yan Ge as soon as possible.”

This time, Yan Jiaqiang didn’t object. “We’ll give him a call after we finish eating.”

At this moment, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were on the Star-Picking Tower, basking in the sun and sipping wine. The winter sunlight bathed them, providing utmost comfort. The Star-Picking Tower was built on the highest point of Fengshan, with six or seven floors, offering a panoramic view of the entire farm. However, the Star-Picking Tower was a viewing place specially built for Yan Ge by Huangfu Yuchen, and it wasn’t open to the public. So, it didn’t have an official name; the employees and visitors just referred to it as “high tower.”

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“They must be here to discuss the farm,” Huangfu Yuchen said as he stuffed a grape into Yan Ge’s mouth. It was now November, and grapes were long gone, but these were picked from Yan Ge’s space—they were plump and enticingly purple.

Yan Ge had already made up his mind. “Let’s talk, it’s better to clear things up at once.”

“Alright.” Huangfu Yuchen kissed his head. However he narrowed his eyes in thought, both Yan Jiaqiang and Du Rulan were driven by their self-interest. Would they easily let Yan Ge off the hook? Unlikely. So, his retaliation should continue.

The two lingered on the high tower for a while, and Yan Jiaqiang called Yan Ge’s phone.

“Where are you now?”

“Go to Private Room No. 1 at Dongnuan Pavilion. Yu Chen and I will be there soon.” Yan Ge stood up after speaking and stretched lazily.

“I’m here for you.” Huangfu Yuchen wrapped his arms around Yan Ge from behind, kissing his cheek. “Let’s go.”

The two took the sightseeing elevator downstairs, heading towards Dongnuan Pavilion shoulder to shoulder. A small monkey was eating an apple on an apple tree and with a light leap, it landed on Yan Ge’s shoulder, turned its head to look at him, and playfully scratched its head as it made chattering sounds…

Yan Ge patted its head and casually placed it back on the tree.

Passing tourists looked on with surprise but the farm's staff in the orchard didn't find it unusual. Having spent some time on the farm, they had already noticed that the two bosses had a strong connection with animals, and the animals on the farm liked to be around them. The only difference was that the second boss, Mr. Huangfu, appeared stern, so timid animals wouldn't dare approach him.

Huangfu Yuchen plucked a bright red apple from the tree and handed it to Yan Ge.

Yan Ge didn't eat it; he held it and played with it in his hands.

The two reached Dongnuan Pavilion at a leisurely pace.

Yan Jiaqiang and Du Rulan watched them approach coldly.

Yan Jiaqiang calmly surveyed Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. To be honest, his second son was good in all aspects, be it appearance or personality. However, there was that "fate affecting the fortune of the Yan family business." For the greater good, he had to let go of his second son. Often, he watched him stumble and fall without extending a hand to help, but his second son had a good nature and was always smiling, with a sense of tolerance in his eyes. Now, Yan Ge has changed. Though he still wore a smile most of the time, there was an added edge to his demeanor. Perhaps his patience and tolerance had finally run dry, causing him to become somewhat distant from his parents. He seemed to have let go of something, no longer holding any expectations. This version of Yan Ge was somewhat difficult for Yan Jiaqiang to comprehend.

His gaze then shifted to Huangfu Yuchen. This man was even more enigmatic, like a pond of water, unfathomable. He was like a sword yet to be unsheathed, but no scabbard could contain his sharpness. How could a person who established such a massive farm in just three short months be an ordinary individual?

Du Rulan stared intently at Yan Ge, her face showing displeasure and her eyes were filled with anger that seemed ready to erupt. After a moment, she

shot a resentful look at Huangfu Yuchen. If it weren't for him, Yan Ge wouldn't treat them like this.

Yan Ge seemed oblivious to their scrutiny and walked in naturally.

Huangfu Yuchen closed the door to the private room and cast a soundproofing spell. He walked over to Yan Ge and sat down.

"Why did you suddenly come to find me?" Yan Ge poured tea into four cups, his tone very polite.

Yan Jiaqiang spoke slowly and deliberately, "Yan Ge, you must be aware of the existence of Emerald Villa. You are humiliating your father by establishing this farm. What were you thinking?"

"Father?" Yan Ge looked into his eyes and asked in a calm tone, "Do you still consider yourselves my father and mother? Do you treat me as your son?"

Yan Jiaqiang frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

Du Rulan stood up, her voice agitated. "Don't treat you as a son? What else do you want? Do we need to work like slaves for you before you consider us your parents?"

Yan Ge didn't even look at her, still gazing at Yan Jiaqiang as he replied evenly, "I know about the incident with the fortune teller you sought."

Yan Jiaqiang and Du Rulan's faces changed simultaneously. They subconsciously exchanged a glance and then looked at Yan Ge. When they met his clear gaze, they felt a bit guilty and looked away.

Huangfu Yuchen chimed in, not mincing words. "Perhaps Xiao Ge and I should be grateful that the fortune teller didn't say he would harm you, otherwise, who knows if Xiao Ge would even exist now?" This was something Yan Ge couldn't say, but Huangfu Yuchen could.

Du Rulan's face turned pale, and her volume rose as she stared at Huangfu Yuchen. She spoke as if she was addressing her husband's murderer. "What

are you saying? Are you implying that Jiaqiang and I would harm our own son?”

“I never said that.” Huangfu Yuchen looked at her with a half-smile, his gaze as if he were looking at a clown.

Only now did Yan Ge’s gaze fall on Du Rulan. “Do you know that the jade you got from the fortune teller holds a deadly array? And that I would die if I wore it for a full forty-nine days?”

Du Rulan was taken aback and blurted out, “Impossible! It’s just suppressing malevolent energy—”

Yan Jiaqiang turned his head abruptly, looking at her. “Suppressing malevolent energy?”

“Suppressing malevolent energy?” Yan Ge chuckled lightly. “That’s no longer important. What’s important is that from now on, I won’t bother you, and you don’t need to come find me.”

“Yan Ge!” Yan Jiaqiang’s voice grew stern.

Huangfu Yuchen smiled and calmly said, “Mr. Yan, there’s no need to pay attention to Xiao Ge, right? Don’t you have three sons?”

Du Rulan was surprised and fell silent.

She didn’t catch the implied meaning in Huangfu Yuchen’s words, she just suddenly thought that it wouldn’t be bad to sever the parent-child relationship with Yan Ge. She could use his being with another man as an excuse. “You have a beautiful fantasy. We raised you, yet this is how you repay us? If you don’t want us to come looking for you, you should immediately transfer ownership of the farm to your father.”

Yan Ge laughed heartily, “Madam Yan, have you misunderstood something? I’m the big boss outwardly for the farm, but it was Yuchen who funded it. Have you forgotten that my properties and company were given to you? Where would I get so much money to run a farm?”

Du Rulan didn’t listen to his explanation at all. She only knew that saving the Emerald Villa was the most important thing now. “I don’t care. If you can’t do it, we’ll let the outside world understand how unfilial you are!”

Yan Ge laughed even harder, nearly doubling over.

Yan Jiaqiang also couldn’t help but look at Du Rulan in disbelief, thinking she had gone mad.

Huangfu Yuchen smiled, calculating how to give Du Rulan a lesson.

After laughing enough, Yan Ge spoke. “As you wish. Yuchen and I aren’t short on money. It doesn’t even matter if the farm doesn’t have a single guest. It would be far quieter for us.”

Du Rulan was momentarily stunned, at a loss for words.

Huangfu Yuchen added a jab, “In fact, I set up this farm for Xiao Ge to play with.”

“You, you’re crazy!” Du Rulan stared at Huangfu Yuchen in disbelief. The farm she envied was nothing more than a plaything Huangfu Yuchen gave Yan Ge! It left her feeling both angry and pained.

Yan Jiaqiang remained silent for a while before speaking again. “Yan Ge, must it come to this?”

Yan Ge smiled faintly and without even looking at him, said: “You raised me; that’s a fact. I will save your lives if you and Madam Du ever fall into a life-threatening situation.”

Du Rulan scornfully retorted, “That’s easy for you to say! Even if we were really in danger, what could you possibly do?”

Yan Jiaqiang’s head throbbed from her sharp voice. He stood up and looked at Yan Ge with a complex expression for a while. “I admit I’ve wronged you, I don’t deny that. But if given a second chance, I’m afraid I’d make the same choice.”

Yan Ge smiled indifferently. “Is that so?”

“I’m leaving.” Yan Jiaqiang sighed, opened the door and left the room.

Du Rulan was completely baffled by his actions. Weren’t they here to confront and reprimand Yan Ge? What is going on now?

She quickly chased after him, “Husband! Husband!”

Huangfu Yuchen mocked as he watched their departing figures. “Quite the pair of oddballs.”

Yan Ge burst into laughter and patted his shoulder. “Yo! You’ve got an extensive vocabulary!”

“It’s all thanks to your excellent tutoring.” Huangfu Yuchen stood up, hugging Yan Ge. “Come on, let’s go to the vegetable garden and pick some vegetables for hot pot tonight.”

Yan Ge’s eyes lit up. “Okay, go grab a basket.”

The two of them strolled to the vegetable garden, where spinach, mustard greens, bok choy, and other vegetables were thriving.

The staff in the garden saw them from afar, and were not surprised by their presence. These two bosses were the most unique ones they had seen and heard of. Neither employed an overbearing demeanor, which made working under them a relaxed experience.

Ji Chang hurriedly walked over from a distant path.

“Mr. Yan, Mr. Huangfu.”

“What’s the matter?” Yan Ge knocked the dirt off the root of a bok choy before placing it into the basket.

Ji Chang glanced at the mud on their pant legs and shoe soles. Even though it wasn’t the first time he had seen this, he still felt somewhat unaccustomed

to it. After a moment, he answered, “A few ‘important figures’ have arrived outside the estate, and it seems they are not friendly.”

“Oh?” Yan Ge raised an eyebrow. The so-called “important figures” referred to cultivators, while the estate’s true esteemed guests were referred to as “VIPs.”

Huangfu Yuchen, who was picking spinach beside them, didn’t even bat an eye. Yan Ge liked spinach, so he had to pick more, or there wouldn’t be enough to eat.

Yan Ge’s spiritual sense swept through the estate’s entrance, then he bent down and pulled out a radish with a grin, “Let’s not disturb them for now. Maybe they’re just trying to appear fierce? Mr. Ji, don’t judge a book by its cover.”

Ji Chang didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Mr. Yan’s character was still as amusing as ever. He hadn’t felt that way when they had first met. However, Yan Ge’s words put his mind at ease. Rolling up his sleeves, he said, “Let me help.”

Huangfu Yuchen shot him a sidelong glance and said coldly, “We husbands are here for our own amusement. What are you joining in for?”

“Um…” Ji Chang awkwardly scratched his head. “Then I won’t disturb you.”

With that, he quickly walked away.

Yan Ge chuckled inwardly. Once Ji Chang was far enough, he turned to Huangfu Yuchen and said, “Tone it down a bit. Don’t accidentally make him bent.”

“I’m just kindly reminding him, so he doesn’t make bigger mistakes in the future.” Huangfu Yuchen justified himself.

Yan Ge tore off a cabbage leaf and playfully slapped it onto Huangfu Yuchen’s face. He then looked at the two full baskets they had gathered.

“These should be enough, right?”

“Let’s go.” Huangfu Yuchen picked up both baskets. “We’ll head back through the orchard and pick some fruit on the way.”

After picking the fruits, the two returned to their residence on the mountain’s small courtyard. As they prepared hot pot, they used their spiritual sense to check on the three cultivators who had entered the farm earlier—

After the three finished eating, they requested to stay in the hotel for a month. Upon being rejected, their expressions turned sour and their attitudes became domineering.

Yan Ge picked up three apples he had just plucked and inconspicuously threw them.

The three were hit by the apples and were stunned for a moment. They looked around, but did not find anything. Their expressions immediately changed as they seemed to think of something.

The hotel manager was also puzzled but didn’t think too much of it. He assumed someone was playing a prank.

Seeing the hostility in the eyes of the three, Yan Ge nodded. “Great timing—chickens have come to our doorstep. What better way to deter monkeys than to kill a chicken?”

Huangfu Yuchen stirred the boiling hot pot with a ladle. “Baby, will you go, or should I?”

Yan Ge glanced into the pot. “I’ll go. It’ll be time to eat by the time I’m back. Also, add some more noodles for me.” Before the words even settled, he had disappeared.

These three were relatively young, around thirty years old each. The one leading was named Wu Meng, towering in stature and built like a wall. People who knew him were aware that he was stubborn and had a fiery

temper. Once he made up his mind about something, whether right or wrong, he wouldn’t give up without being taught a lesson.

Standing on his left was Li Yue, also an unreasonable person. If it weren’t for his exceptional talent, he wouldn’t have been accepted as a disciple by the Mimeng Mountain sect leader.

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The third was Xiong Wei. He was very handsome, with refined eyebrows and a high nose bridge. However, his pair of narrow and sharp phoenix eyes gleamed with a sinister light, as if constantly scheming something, making it difficult for people to feel favorable towards him.

These three were disciples of the Mimeng Mountain Sect. They happened to pass by the imperial capital and sensed the fluctuations of spiritual energy here.

Mimeng Mountain wasn’t a small sect. Their foundational cultivation techniques were ranked among the top five in various cultivation sects, big and small, across the country. However, due to the scarcity of spiritual energy on Earth, even with good techniques, lacking spiritual energy was akin to possessing a peerless weapon without the secret techniques to use it. So, just like other sects, Mimeng Mountain was barely hanging on. But today, they stumbled upon this sacred place. For cultivators, it was a rare opportunity that they wouldn’t just let slip by.

These were fellow disciples. Xiong Wei ranked the lowest, yet he was the most intelligent and held a leading position among them. He was cautious and discerning. He was certain that whoever openly displays such abundant spiritual energy was not a simple character. Therefore, the intention to stay at the farm for a month was a ruse. The true purpose was to gauge the estate’s owner. Of course, if they could genuinely stay here for a month, that would be even better.

However, the three apples which appeared out of nowhere left him feeling uneasy. This made him even more certain that the owner of the estate was not an ordinary person. He didn’t dare to act recklessly, but he also wasn’t willing to leave empty-handed.

His gaze slid over Wu Meng and Li Yue. He hesitated for a moment, then he muttered under his breath, “Wu Meng, Li Yue, this estate is no simple place. I think we’d better leave first and then make plans. Otherwise, I’m afraid we’ll get in but not be able to get out.”

Wu Meng turned his head, looking at him with surprise and a touch of disdain. “Xiong Wei, you’re good at many things, but your courage is lacking. You’re about to get a golden opportunity, but you’re willing to let it slip away? I won’t. Think about it, the spiritual energy here is so abundant. If we could stay here for a month, our cultivation would improve significantly!”

A fervent enthusiasm gleamed in his eyes.

“I—,” Xiong Wei’s face displayed a hint of embarrassment, “It’s not that I lack courage, it’s just that I’m concerned, you know?”

Li Yue shook his head and his gaze toward Xiong Wei also held a hint of disdain. He arrogantly stated, “What are you afraid of with me around? Rest assured, I’ll have your back.”

Left with no other option, Xiong Wei decided to keep quiet. As Wu Meng and Li Yue turned their heads away, a flash of mockery flickered in his eyes: ‘Two fools.’

Wu Meng strode purposefully to the counter, and slammed his thick and meaty palm, instantly causing the pen holder on the counter to jump up. He shouted loudly, “Call your boss out! How can you run a hotel and not allow people to stay?”

The manager had received instructions from the boss before the official working hours: if there were guests who wanted to stay long-term at the estate and he couldn’t handle it, he should direct them to Division Two

Following the manager’s instructions, Wu Meng and his brothers went to the Division Two where Yan Ge had been waiting for them there.

Without waiting for the three to speak, he directly said, “You have my apologies. You’re welcome to dine at the farm, but it’s not permitted for guests to stay here long-term.”

Upon seeing him, Wu Meng and the other two knew that this person was definitely also a cultivator, although they couldn’t discern his level of cultivation.

Xiong Wei had an uneasy feeling in his heart and stood at the back, not saying a word.

As the favorite disciple of Mimeng Mountain’s sect leader He Chuanfeng, Li Yue stepped forward confidently, “Fellow cultivator, we are disciples of Mimeng Mountain. I am Li Yue, a closed-door disciple under Sect Leader He Chuanfeng. These two are my senior brothers, Xiong Wei and Wu Meng. Since you’re also a fellow cultivator, how about we find a way to make things more convenient?”

Yan Ge shook his head. “These are the rules.”

They were surrounded by spiritual energy but couldn’t stay here for an extended period. It felt like having a table full of delicious food but being unable to eat much due to mouth ulcers. Wu Meng’s frustration was instantly ignited, and he asked in a harsh tone, “What if we insist on staying here?”

Yan Ge chuckled lightly, maintaining his relaxed posture, leaning against the back of his chair, legs crossed on the desk. “Well, then it depends on whether you have the ability to do so.”

“Alright! I’ll learn from you!” Wu Meng raised his fist and swung it towards Yan Ge’s face.

Li Yue didn’t stop him; he believed that his skills were the best and should be saved as a trump card for later. When Wu Meng couldn’t handle it any longer, he would take the stage.

Xiong Wei stood even farther back, as if he wasn't with Wu Meng and Li Yue. He fixed his gaze on Yan Ge, curious about his true strength.

Wu Meng's punch indeed carried substantial force. Yan Ge felt a gust of wind rushing towards his face. He pressed his right palm against the armrest of his chair, propelling himself into the air and landing securely on the sofa diagonally opposite the desk.

Wu Meng's punch struck the desk, and with a "bang", the desk shattered into pieces.

"Desk: 3999, Shipping: 100," Yan Ge smiled gently, raised his wrist to check the time, and murmured to himself, "It's almost ten o'clock. The hotpot should be ready by now. If the noodles are cooked too soft, they won't be easy to pick up."

Wu Meng's full-force palm strike had missed its target. Just as he was still in shock, he heard Yan Ge's words and his rugged face turned red. With a cold snort, he spun around like a frog, leaping up and throwing two punches —one from the left and one from the right—forming a half-circle siege to attack Yan Ge.

Yan Ge remained seated on the sofa. He lifted his legs and used them to fend off Wu Meng's fists. Both legs were kept at approximately forty-five-degree angles, then they suddenly straightened.

In an instant, Wu Meng's fists experienced a powerful impact. His body shook violently, and he fell several steps back, the joints of his elbows emitting a dislocating "crack." There was a chair behind him, and he stumbled over it, falling to the ground in a state of disarray.

He looked at Yan Ge, who was sitting on the sofa with a smile and crossed legs, and stood up in silence to stand off to the side. He had the determination to follow through with whatever he started, but if he encountered a painful lesson in the process, he would immediately give up.

Li Yue inwardly cursed him as a coward. He walked over to Yan Ge with a cold expression, "Let me learn from you!"

He was the closed-door disciple of He Chuanfeng, the Sect Leader of Mimeng Mountain. Yan Ge glanced at him briefly. Generally, those who were accepted as closed-door disciples were either exceptionally talented or favored by the master. Judging by Li Yue's proud and somewhat unlikable appearance, Yan Jiaqiang believed it was likely the former.

The third person hadn't spoken all this while and seemed quite calculating.

Since they might interact with the people from Mimeng Mountain in the future, it wouldn't hurt to take this opportunity to learn about their cultivation techniques. With this thought in mind, Yan Ge changed his initial plan of a quick and decisive victory. He stood up and said, "Okay."

Li Yue took Yan Ge's reaction as a sign that he wasn't underestimating him. Smirking triumphantly, he took something out of his chest pouch and chanted an incantation. The object gradually enlarged, revealing a fine iron rod with six thin spikes resembling barbs, spreading out like a fan when unfolded.

Without hesitation, Li Yue swung his weapon at Yan Ge, attempting to hook his shoulder. If successful, he could pull forcefully, tearing off a chunk of flesh.

Yan Ge didn't draw his sword; instead, he dodged to the side, picking up a broom leaning against the wall and using it to block Li Yue's weapon. Although he and Haungfu Yuchen had higher cultivation levels, their knowledge on cultivation techniques was limited. Since the incident involving the strange jade, they had decided not to directly touch others' weapons, as who knew what hidden mechanisms might be inside?

Wu Meng and Xiong Wei both looked at Yan Ge with complicated expressions, their thoughts difficult to decipher.

Li Yue glared at the broom, feeling insulted. Suddenly, he released his grip, and with both hands, he performed intricate hand signs resembling playing the piano, with quick and flexible movements.

Yan Ge began to view him differently. Li Yue was using two different hand signs simultaneously, multitasking as if they were two different thoughts. Not many people could achieve such a feat.

The weapon controlled by Li Yue suddenly split into two parts, attacking Yan Ge from the front and back simultaneously. It swiftly aimed at his chest and then lunged for his neck, moving so fast it left afterimages.

Yan Ge lifted the broom, moving his hands to repeatedly fend off the hooks.

Li Yue felt proud, and his fingers moved again. The hooks on the weapon suddenly straightened, and fine silver needles were immediately shot out from them.

Six slender silver lights silently flashed by, moving as if they were about to strike Yan Ge.

Li Yue's grin grew wider, but then he saw Yan Ge casually rotate the broom held between his thumb and index finger, not forgetting to give him a slight smile.

Just as Li Yue was wondering why he was smiling, Xiong Wei shouted, "Li Yue, be careful!"

It was only then that Li Yue noticed the five silver dots in the air. These were the five silver needles redirected by Yan Ge. Because they were flying straight towards him, they looked like silver dots.

Li Yue's face turned pale, and he hurriedly somersaulted in the air to avoid the needles. Unfortunately, he wasn't fast enough. Two of the needles forcibly pierced his shoulder and left abdomen.

Li Yue let out a miserable cry and struggled on the ground, his complexion turning deathly pale. How could the needles hidden in the weapon be ordinary? As assassination tools, the needles contained compressed true qi. Upon hitting their target, they would immediately explode, much like mini bombs. That's why he was in such agony.

Wu Meng and Xiong Wei were clearly aware of this. Their expressions changed, and they rushed to Li Yue's side, helping him up and watching Yan Ge warily.

Xiong Wei spoke politely, "Senior, it was our lack of insight not to recognize a master in front of us. We hope that Senior considers our Sect Leader's reputation and won't hold this against the younger generation."

Yan Ge smiled pleasantly, seeming unbothered. "Table and chairs damage fee."

Li Yue was in a cold sweat from the pain, which rendered him unable to speak.

Xiong Wei swiftly took out a bank card from his pocket. "There's over thirteen thousand yuan on this card. The password is 603245."

Yan Ge nodded and suddenly tapped each of the three men on the chest.

Xiong Wei and the others immediately felt their dantians empty, devoid of any true qi. They were left shocked and glared at Yan Ge.

Yan Ge took out a few hundred yuan notes and placed them on the table. He chuckled, "Don't worry. I've just temporarily sealed your true qi and it will naturally be released after two months. This is your travel expense."

Xiong Wei and the others initially thought their cultivation had been crippled and felt their hearts sink. But after hearing the explanation and receiving money for transportation, they were left astonished.

They stared blankly as Yan He calmly departed, exchanging glances with each other. Without touching the money on the table, they hastily left. Their departure seemed more like a swift escape.

Yan Ge instantly reappeared next to Huangfu Yuchen, fixing his gaze into the pot. "Is it ready to eat?"

"You've returned just in time." Huangfu Yuchen placed a bowl of freshly cooked noodles in front of him.

Yan Ge picked up a fish ball and put it in his mouth, eating with a contented smile.

MCUS Chapter 228

Yan Jiaqiang drove to the company.

He had just driven for a short distance when he casually glanced out the car window and saw Huangfu Yuchen standing on the roadside, holding a briefcase and staring at his car as if he was waiting for him. Puzzled, Yan Jiaqiang pulled over and rolled down the window

Huangfu Yuchen walked over, “Mr. Yan, are you interested in negotiating a deal?”

Yan Jiaqiang remained composed. He knew the man before him was not someone who should be underestimated. “I don’t think we have any business between us.”

“It’s about Emerald Villa. Mr. Yan, are you really not interested?” Huangfu Yuchen calmly inquired.

Yan Jiaqiang’s vigilance heightened. Just days ago, several board members of his company had pressured him to find a way to save Emerald Villa. He was already troubled by this matter, and now Huangfu Yuchen had come at this opportune time. Had he conducted a preliminary investigation? However, this wasn’t the appropriate place for discussion. Yan Jiaqiang opened the car door, inviting Huangfu Yuchen inside.

“What do you want?” Yan Jiaqiang asked.

Huangfu Yuchen replied, “It’s simple. I want you to issue a statement to sever your father-son relationship with Xiao Ge and the mother-son relationship between Du Rulan and Xiao Ge. In other words, Yan Ge will have no further ties with the Yan family.”

Having broached the delicate subject, the rift between father and son became evident. Yan Jiaqiang wasn't surprised by Huangfu Yuchen's words, but the offer to separate Yan Ge from the Yan family intrigued him. Perhaps he could leverage this for his benefit.

Thinking of this, he smiled and responded indifferently, "Mr. Huangfu, though I don't have much affection for Yan Ge, he is still my biological son. Why would I sever ties with him out of nowhere?"

Yan Jiaqiang believed he had Huangfu Yuchen's weak spot in his grasp. Yet, he forgot that Huangfu Yuchen had long held his weakness in hand.

Huangfu Yuchen handed him several sheets of paper.

"What's this?" Yan Jiaqiang casually asked as he accepted the sheets. On seeing the title "Wine Recipe", his expression shifted.

He was about to examine them more closely but Huangfu Yuchen retrieved the papers from his hand. "As you may have noticed during your visit to Fengshan, there isn't any distinctive local liquor. The wine sold there is all procured from elsewhere." Fengshan Farm had already entered the right track, and establishing a dedicated winery would be too much hassle. After discussing it with Yan Ge, they decided not to produce their own wine.

"That's true," Yan Jiaqiang admitted, revealing some interest. "So, what's your proposal?"

Huangfu Yuchen explained straightforwardly, "It's quite simple. If you issue a statement severing the father-son relationship between you and Xiao Ge, as well as the mother-son relationship between Du Rulan and Xiao Ge, I will provide you with these four wine recipes for free. Additionally, I guarantee that Fengshan Farm will never produce these types of wine. Once Emerald Villa has access to these distinctive wines, it won't be any worse than Fengshan Farm."

Yan Jiaqiang didn't need to be told that once their newly produced wines hit the market, they would attract customers seeking good-quality wine, especially since they would be the sole suppliers. He could profit

significantly. However, Huangfu Yuchen was giving up such potential gains to ensure Yan Ge's detachment from the Yan family. Was there a conspiracy behind this?

He remained silent for a long time, pondering but lacking a clear answer.

Huangfu Yuchen didn't press further. "In that case, I'll take my leave."

"Wait!" Yan Jiaqiang finally made up his mind. He and his wife had already severed ties with Yan Ge, so severing the relationship wasn't a big deal. As long as the wine recipes were genuine, he wasn't afraid of Huangfu Yuchen's schemes.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded with a calm gaze. "You only need to issue the statement. There's no need to explain why you're severing the relationships. There are four wine recipes in total. As a gesture of goodwill, I'll give you two now. After you make the statement tomorrow, I'll give you the remaining two."

Yan Jiaqiang nodded. "How can I be sure these recipes are genuine?"

"It's simple." Huangfu Yuchen took out a document from his briefcase. "The contract outlines everything clearly. If the recipes are fake, Fengshan Farm will be yours. Take a look. If you're satisfied, sign it."

Yan Jiaqiang was a seasoned fox and could spot any loopholes in a contract. After examining it closely and finding no issues, he relaxed and signed.

Huangfu Yuchen also signed, handing him the two wine recipes and leaving the car.

As Yan Jiaqiang's car disappeared, a nearly imperceptible sneer curled at the corner of Huangfu Yuchen's lips. He turned and walked away.

On this day, Yan Ge noticed Huangfu Yuchen was in an unusually good mood, even humming a popular song. Yan Ge stared at him for a while in surprise before teasingly pinching his upturned lips and asking, "What were you up to today?"

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled and pulled him into an embrace. “What? Checking up on your man?”

Yan Ge nodded.

Huangfu Yuchen laughed, “You’ll find out eventually. Do you want to take a shower?”

“Why shower in the middle of the day?” Yan Ge swatted his hand away from his waist.

Huangfu Yuchen held him close, not letting go. “Join me. I worked up a sweat just stepping outside.”

Yan Ge was dragged toward the bathroom as he rolled his eyes. They were cultivators, cultivators! How could they be sweating just from stepping outside? And it was winter!

Yan Ge remembered something, and he pushed away Huangfu Yuchen’s wandering hand. “By the way, Yuchen, I think we need to find a cultivator to work in Section Two. We can’t personally handle every situation where cultivators cause trouble, right?”

“I’ve thought of that too. Don’t worry, I’ll take care of it.” Huangfu Yuchen’s hand reached a bit further into Yan Ge’s robe, and he closed the bathroom door.

The next morning, a fresh cool breeze swept over the farm.

Huangfu Yuchen descended to the first floor’s living room in his robe. He glanced at the coffee table and saw a newspaper that emitted a faint ink scent lying quietly on it.

He strolled over, picked up the newspaper, and opened it to find a statement. He smiled in satisfaction.

Though the statement lacked legal effect, it conveyed the attitude he desired.

Huangfu Yuchen returned to the second-floor bedroom where Yan Ge was still asleep. His lips were slightly parted in an enticing manner, and the corner of his sleepwear had rolled up, revealing his firm and toned abdomen filled with hickeys. His lips were curled in a smile as he slept soundly.

Huangfu Yuchen lightly pressed his forehead against Yan Ge's, giving his beloved a quick peck on the lips. He then hugged him close and tucked him in, deciding to catch some more sleep.

Yan Ge woke up and without opening his eyes, he instinctively reached out to the side and hugged onto something soft. When he finally opened his eyes and looked, he found it was a pillow. Huangfu Yuchen wasn't in bed.

"What are you busy with?" Yan Ge mumbled incoherently and yawned. He faintly heard cheers and laughter from outside, so he looked out of the window.

It was snowing!

Snowflakes were falling gently from the sky, creating a serene and tranquil atmosphere. A thin layer of white had already covered the tree branches, dressing them in silver and white, creating a picturesque scene.

The Zhantian Vine climbed out from under the pillow, stretching lazily.

Yan Ge playfully tapped it and got out of bed to freshen up.

When he went to the living room on the first floor, he noticed the open newspaper on the coffee table. He picked it up and glanced at it, pondering its contents.

….

Yan Yan's academic performance was average, so he attended a local second-tier university.

Despite being a bit far from home, he didn't stay in the dormitory. As long as there wasn't anything special happening, he would always go home.

One afternoon, as he was leaving school, he happened to see a small cat. It looked almost identical to his own cat, Douding, which left him quite amazed.

The cat was incredibly cute, hopping around on the snowy ground, thoroughly enjoying itself and leaving behind a trail of tiny footprints. After Yan Yan had stared at it for a while, it turned its head and looked at him, emitting a “meow” as if greeting him. It even lifted its right front leg in a gesture of hello.

Yan Yan chuckled; it seemed like he had a connection with this cat. Plus, its fur appeared somewhat dirty, not like it had an owner. He decided to adopt it and took a step closer.

The little cat bounced away, running a few steps before glancing back at him.

Yan Yan hurriedly chased after it.

After chasing for quite a while without catching up, Yan Yan was on the verge of giving up. However, whenever he thought about the cat twisting its head and looking at him as if mocking him, his competitive spirit flared up again, and he dashed forward.

He didn’t know how far he had run, but he finally managed to scoop up the little cat and cradle it in his arms.

“Let’s see where you’re trying to run off to,” he lightly patted the cat’s head, “Come on, come home with me.”

As he turned around, he noticed a familiar car parked by the roadside.

The car must have been there for a while, as a thin layer of snow had accumulated on top of it.

“Dad’s car?” He looked around and froze immediately.

Not far away, a tall man was holding a four or five-year-old child as they walked in this direction. Beside him, a woman with long hair in a coffee-

colored coat was intimately linked to his arm.

Even though the man was wearing sunglasses, Yan Yan recognized him from his facial shape, height, build, and walking posture. It was Yan Jiaqiang!

“Dad!” His face was filled with disbelief as he screamed out.

Yan Jiaqiang trembled, stunned that Yan Yan would appear here. He instinctively thought about pretending not to know Yan Yan and turned in the other direction.

However, Yan Yan rushed over and knocked the sunglasses off his nose.

“It’s really you! Who is she! Who is he!”

Fury surged in Yan Yan’s eyes and he immediately slapped the woman’s face hard.

Caught off guard, Yin Huiru’s cheeks immediately reddened.

“Waaaa, Mom, Dad…” The little boy was frightened and burst into tears.

“Yan Yan!” Yan Jiaqiang was furious and he raised his hand and slapped Yan Yan.

Yan Yan’s face stung as if it were on fire. He covered his face, staring at Yan Jiaqiang in disbelief. “You actually hit me? Bastard! You’re all bastards!”

“You!” Yan Jiaqiang was enraged, ready to strike again.

Yan Yan let go of the kitten, turned his head, and ran.

In the shadows, Huangfu Yuchen smiled faintly, put away his camera, and left calmly.

Yan Yan ran all the way, suddenly bumping into a wall and falling back, tears streaming down his face. His arm was suddenly gripped by a strong

hand, and a gentle, deep male voice sounded in his ear, “Sorry. Are you okay?”

Yan Yan raised his head, tears still visible in his eyes as he looked at the man’s appearance, and he was stunned. This man was probably around twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old, with sharp features and a deep-set face. Under his handsome brows, his pitch-black eyes held a hint of gentleness. With a high nose and soft lips that seemed to be smiling, he exuded a certain charm. This person was handsome; although he couldn’t compare to Huangfu Yuchen, his relatively gentle demeanor made him even more appealing to Yan Yan than Huangfu Yuchen.

“Why is such a grown man crying so easily?” Xiao Shuai couldn’t help but chuckle at the sight of the boy who looked like he was still a student. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to him.

Yan Yan was still in a daze.

Seeing that his cheek was red and slightly swollen, Xiao Shuai felt a bit sympathetic and helped him wipe his face with the handkerchief.

“Be more careful when you walk in the future.”

Xiao Shuai finished speaking and was about to leave when his coat was grabbed.

“Can you give me a place to stay for the night?”

Xiao Shuai was taken aback, his brows furrowing.

Yan Yan took out his wallet and handed him his ID card and student ID. “I’m not trying to deceive you or anything, and I don’t have any ill intentions. I just don’t want anyone to find me for the time being.”

“Aren’t you afraid I’m a bad person?” Xiao Shuai raised an eyebrow.

Yan Yan smiled, “Would a bad person offer someone a handkerchief?”

Xiao Shuai nodded helplessly. “Fine, but just for one night.”

“Thank you.” Yan Yan nodded and quickly caught up with him, “I’m Yan Yan. And you?”

Xiao Shuai recalled the address on his ID card and had a vague guess about his identity. “Xiao Shuai. But let’s get one thing straight, it’s just for one night.”

“Yeah, thanks.” Yan Yan nodded. “Achoo—”

Xiao Shuai looked at his thin clothes and shook his head inwardly. Kids nowadays only care about looking stylish instead of. staying warm. He took off the scarf around his neck and handed it to Yan Yan.

A hint of happiness appeared in Yan Yan’s eyes. He thanked Xiao Shuai and wrapped the scarf around his neck. Catching the faint tobacco scent on it, his face inexplicably felt hot.

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Yan Jiaqiang didn’t return home that day. When he called, Du Rulan’s tone was normal.

He breathed a sigh of relief, it seemed that Yan Yan hadn’t told Du Rulan about the situation yet, giving him some preparation time.

The next afternoon, Yan Jiaqiang returned home from work. As soon as he entered the door, Du Rulan pounced on him, scratching his face with both hands and shouting in a frenzy, “Yan Jiaqiang! Why did you treat me like this? Who is that woman? Who is she?”

The physical strength of the irrational woman should not be underestimated. Yan Jiaqiang was careless and got scratched by Du Rulan’s long nails, leaving a blood mark on the right side of his face. He winced in pain.

Initially, he felt a bit guilty. Du Rulan was his legally wedded wife after all, and they had raised three children together. However, being scratched like this made him angry. He grabbed Du Rulan’s wrist and pushed her onto the couch, growling, “Are you crazy? Stop acting like a madwoman!”

The household staff were startled by his harsh tone and dared not appear, hiding in the kitchen.

“Mad woman? Whose fault is that? I’ll fight you to the end, you shameless, heartless bastard! Shameless!” Du Rulan yelled and cried, her well-groomed hair in a tangled mess around her face. She looked like a madwoman as she lunged at Yan Jiaqiang, hitting and scratching.

Yan Jiaqiang tightly held her wrist, his brows furrowed. In some ways, being discovered wasn’t a bad thing. He had lost any feelings he had for Du Rulan a long time ago, and the Du family no longer held much value to

him. If Du Rulan wanted a divorce, it might even be better. He still had four wine recipes on hand. Even if other businesses of the Yan family couldn't be revived, he could stand firm again with the Emerald Villa.

Thinking this, he slapped the hysterical Du Rulan, who was covered in tears and snot, back onto the couch. He snorted, not bothering to look at her, and went upstairs to his study. He locked the door, and went to the safe. He wanted to take the wine recipes and stay at another place for a few days as he sorted out his issues with Du Rulan.

After entering the password, he opened the safe and was dumbfounded—there was nothing inside! All four wine recipes he had stored were gone!

He quickly calmed down and thought about it—other than him, only Du Rulan knew the password. His face changed dramatically, and he left the study quickly, rushing downstairs. He grabbed the crying Du Rulan as if picking up a chick, and pushed Yan Yan, who was comforting her, aside.

"I'll ask you once did you take what was in the safe?"

"I didn't!" Du Rulan cried out, "wuuu…"

"Dad, you're crazy!" Yan Yan's chest heaved with anger, and he quickly helped Du Rulan up.

Yan Jiaqiang raised his head and slapped Du Rulan's face, his voice stern, "Only you know the safe's password aside from me. Who else could it be? Speak! Where did you hide it?"

Du Rulan stared at him like a stranger, loudly crying out for help, "Help! Help! Someone help, he's killing me!"

Yan Jiaqiang's face was cold, and he wanted to hit her again.

Yan Yan pushed him away, "Yan Jiaqiang! Have you gone crazy?"

"Its none of your business." Yan Jiaqiang shoved him aside, kicked Du Rulan in the side, and demanded, "Tell me, did you take it?"

Du Rulan stood in front of Yan Yan, a sly smile on her face. “Yes, I took it! I’ve destroyed them all! If you dare, go ahead and kill me!” In truth, she didn’t have a clue what Yan Jiaqiang was talking about; she was deliberately provoking him.

“You!” Yan Jiaqiang’s head spun with anger, and he laughed. “Okay, you think I won’t dare?” With that, he slapped Du Rulan’s mouth harshly. However, the back of his head suddenly throbbed with pain. He slowly turned around, and saw Yan Yan holding the neck of a vase, broken fragments littered the ground.

Yan Jiaqiang felt dizzy. He clutched his head in pain, and slumped down on the floor, his hand covered in blood.

Yan Yan was stunned. He let go of the vase’s neck, and it crashed to the floor.

Du Rulan’s face turned pale, “Help! Someone! Call an ambulance!”

Yan Weifeng and Zhang Qiaoqiao had gone to pick up Yan Si from kindergarten and returned home at this moment. They were shocked by the scene and quickly stepped forward to help.

While the Yan family was in chaos, Huangfu Yuchen sent the photos from the digital camera to the newspaper’s email and then returned to the farm.

Yan Ge didn’t ask him what he had been doing; instead, he went up to him, hugged him, and kissed his lips, then returned to the sofa with a nonchalant look and watched TV as if nothing had happened.

Huangfu Yuchen was taken aback for a moment, then he smiled and sat down beside him. Together, they watched TV.

During this time, Yan Ge received several phone calls. All were regarding Yan Jiaqiang cutting ties with him. After finishing the calls, his phone ran out of battery.

People who knew him knew that Yan Ge’s parents didn’t like him, so most of them sympathized with him.

People who didn’t know him assumed that Yan Jiaqiang had cut ties with him because he was in a relationship with a man. However, they didn’t care much. After all, people’s thoughts were becoming more open these days, and their family matters had nothing to do with others.

In general, Yan Ge didn’t hear anything bad.

The next day, the popular “Imperial Capital Daily” extensively reported about Yan Jiaqiang’s affair and the fact that he had a son almost the same age as his grandson. The entire business world was in an uproar. Just over a month ago, Yan Jiaqiang and Du Rulan had been featured on the front page of the newspaper, showing their affection. Everyone was now laughing at the Yan family.

The Yan family and the Du family also stirred up a fuss. Although a married daughter was like spilled water, the Du family was also prominent figures. How could they let someone slap their faces and not retaliate?

Inside the Yan family, there was also turmoil. The Yan family’s businesses were currently facing a major crisis. As the head of the family, Yan Jiaqiang should have dealt with the situation promptly, but he was now wrapped in scandals. This is tantamount to encouraging other members of the Yan family to rebel against him.

Yan Jiaqiang first had his affair exposed, then he lost the wine recipes, and now he was being questioned by other members of the Yan family. He was in a dire situation.

He called Huangfu Yuchen, wanting him to provide the wine recipes again, but Huangfu Yuchen replied innocently, “ I’m sorry Mr. Yan. I directly gave you the original recipes back then because I wanted to show my sincerity and also because I was afraid you wouldn’t believe the recipes. You should have noticed that the recipes were written on very old paper. In other words, I don’t have any copies.”

Yan Jiaqiang was thunderstruck.

On the other hand, Du Rulan wasn't one to be underestimated. She quickly found out Yin Huiru's address and rushed iver to scold her. Soon, that too made the headlines.

While all this was going on, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen's house was peaceful and warm.

Yan Ge was sitting on the couch, watching TV, while Huangfu Yuchen was looking over the account books. At this moment, his phone suddenly rang.

— "You are my little apple, I can't love you enough…"

Yan Ge's eyelid twitched and he shot Huangfu Yuchen a glare. He'd get goosebumps all over his body every time he heard that ringtone. He had even changed the ringtone a few times, but Huangfu Yuchen always changed it back, so he had no choice but to let it be.

"Baby, the lyrics after that are great." Huangfu Yuchen explained, patting Yan Ge's head before answering the call with a calm voice that was neither enthusiastic nor cold, "Who's this?"

A middle-aged man's calm and enthusiastic voice came from the other end, "Mr. Huangfu, I'm Meng Yingshan, the CEO of Feiyang Group. We're having a banquet at Jingli Hotel the day after tomorrow at 7 PM. I wonder if Mr. Huangfu and Mr. Yan would be honored to join us?"

"Xiao Ge?" Huangfu Yuchen looked at Yan Ge for confirmation.

Yan Ge nodded absentmindedly, his eyes still fixed on the TV drama "Suspicion During the Turmoil," which was reaching its climax tonight.

Huangfu Yuchen replied, "Mr. Meng, it's our pleasure to be invited. We will be there on time."

"Good, haha. Then I'll await your arrival."

Two days later, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen appeared at Jingli Hotel at 7 PM, dressed exceptionally handsome, and right on time.

Meng Yingshan saw them and walked up with a smile.

“Mr. Yan, long time no see. Hello, Mr. Huangfu. I’ve heard a lot about Mr. Huangfu’s talents and handsomeness, seeing you today, it seems your reputation is well-deserved.”

“Mr. Meng, you’re being too kind.” Yan Ge smiled gently, “If you have time, feel free to drop by the farm.”

Meng Yingshan led them to a quieter area. “I invited both of you here for a few reasons. First, I wanted to personally express my gratitude. Second, I hope to make friends with you. And third, I’d like to introduce a few friends to you. They are interested in collaborating with your farm.”

“We appreciate the opportunity, Mr. Meng.” Yan Ge looked at the group of young people walking towards them.

Among them, the one in the middle stood out the most. He was around twenty-seven or twenty-eight, with striking features, a handsome appearance, and walked as if he was on a runway. The man to his left was a couple of years younger, but his presence was just as strong. His eyes were sharp and perceptive, and he subtly scanned Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen before giving them a courteous smile and nodding. The woman beside them wore a desert-colored dress with high heels, confidently striding forward. She exuded a strong aura of a successful woman.

“Allow me to introduce them to you. This is Xiao Shuai, the CEO of Qingyuan Enterprise; this is Kang Wei, the CEO of Hengchun Limited; and this is Anqi, the director of Kang’an Group.”

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen exchanged greetings with them.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Xiao Shuai smiled, “Your farm is truly impressive. I was lucky to get some discount coupons the first time I visited

with my family. Unfortunately, my younger brother and cousin snatched the coupons from me before we even got home."

Everyone laughed.

Meng Yingshan chuckled, "You young folks always have interesting things to discuss. I, on the other hand, won't join in the fun."

After Meng Yingshan left, the group exchanged a few words of casual conversation before getting to the main topic.

"Mr. Yan, Mr. Huangfu, to be honest, the three of us are interested in visiting your farm. However, we've heard that your farm is rather cautious about collaborating with other companies. We were worried that dropping by directly might be too forward. So, we thought we'd take this opportunity to have a chat with the two of you." Kang Wei spoke rapidly, clearly a straightforward person.

Huangfu Yuchen patted Yan Ge's shoulder and suggested, "Xiao Ge, Xu Kai is over there. Do you want to go say hello?"

Yan Ge nodded and turned to Xiao Shuai and the others, "An old friend of mine is also here. Please excuse me for a moment."

"Mr. Yan, please go ahead."

After Yan Ge walked away, Huangfu Yuchen gestured with his hand, inviting the three of them to a quieter spot.

"I understand the nature of your respective businesses," Huangfu Yuchen began, "and I have a general idea of the areas you're interested in collaborating on. This isn't a problem, but I do have a condition."

"Oh?" Xiao Shuai had initially thought Huangfu Yuchen might be difficult to deal with due to his cold expression. However, Huangfu Yuchen speak directly and straightforwardly, and his impression improved slightly. "Please, go on."

Kang Wei and Anqi also looked intrigued.

“We’re here on behalf of our companies, and we’re all the decision-makers,” Anqi smiled charmingly. “Mr. Huangfu, please feel free to share your condition.”

Huangfu Yuchen took a sip of his wine and calmly stated, “As long as you can help me destroy Yan Jiaqiang’s company, not only will I cooperate with you, but I’ll also share 10% of the profits with you.”

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Huangfu Yuchen knew that Meng Yingshan had sought out the well-known enterprises in the capital, so these three individuals definitely had the power to bring down the Yan family's businesses. As for profit sharing, Fengshan Farm's largest investment was in the form of spiritual energy, which didn't need any capital investment on his part, and the other aspects of investment were not substantial. Even if he offered 10% of the profits, it wouldn't result in a loss.

Xiao Shuai, Kang Wei, and Anqi exchanged astonished glances, a look of surprise and suspicion in their eyes. 10% profits! While 10% might not sound like much, if they collaborated and established a long-term high-volume partnership as expected, 10% wasn't a small figure!

"Are you serious?" Kang Wei asked seriously.

Huangfu Yuchen responded calmly, "I never joke."

Xiao Shuai glanced at Yan Ge, who was chatting with someone in the distance, thoughtfully. "Does he know about this?" He examined Huangfu Yuchen, feeling that he didn't seem like the type of person to exploit his lover's emotions for revenge. Perhaps he was overthinking things.

Huangfu Yuchen didn't answer directly, "This is what Yan Jianqiang owes Xiao Ge. You can think about it."

Xiao Shuai seemed to understand. It seemed that he was seeking revenge on behalf of Yan Ge. Xiao Shuai had thought that Huangfu Yuchen held a grudge against Yan Jianqiang.

Kang Wei extended his hand to Huangfu Yuchen. "I agree. The Yan businesses are already on their last legs."

Huangfu Yuchen shook hands with him. “Happy cooperation.”

“Happy cooperation,” Anqi added, also extending her hand. Regardless of Huangfu Yuchen’s motives, what mattered was how much benefits her company could get.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded and calmly looked at Xiao Shuai.

Xiao Shuai chuckled and extended his hand as well. “Mr. Huangfu, prepare the contract in advance.”

“You can rest assured.”

After exchanging business cards, they went their separate ways.

With a weight lifted off his mind, Huangfu Yuchen walked over to Yan Ge, casually resting his hand on Yan Ge’s shoulder. “What were you discussing?”

“Isn’t it about your farm?” Xu Kai asked in a low voice. “Yan Ge, Huangfu, do you have any secret techniques for the vegetables and fruits you grow at the farm? My wife’s skin has improved a lot after eating your vegetables for a month. My knee used to have some hidden pain due to an old injury, but it’s gotten much better lately.”

Yan Ge shrugged, smiling playfully. “Who knows? Yuchen?”

Huangfu Yuchen raised his hands in a gesture of surrender.

Xu Kai shook his head in resignation and tsked, but he didn’t press further.

Yan Ge added, “By the way, I’ve been meaning to ask you. Is there something wrong with He Xin? He seemed down and lacking spirit the last few times I’ve seen him. When I ask him, he doesn’t say anything.”

Xu Kai seemed to recall something, shook his head, sighed, glanced around, and lowered his voice. “Isn’t it because of his excellent in-laws? You haven’t forgotten he’s the son-in-law who married into the family, right?”

Yan Ge nodded. “I haven’t forgotten. What happened?”

Huangfu Yuchen brought a plate of snacks to Yan Ge.

As Yan Ge ate, Xu Kai continued talking.

“Back then, Father Long and Mother Long just had a modest shop. It’s safe to say that He Xin played a significant role in building up the Long family’s department store business. He Xin endured so much hardship initially, and we, his good friends, all know that. But I don’t know what got into his in-law’s heads, or maybe it’s because of their bootlicking nephew, they actually said He Xin is an outsider and handed the company over to Long Xing to manage. To put it bluntly, the store was like He Xin’s son. Father Long and Mother Long snatched it away, despite He Xin’s hard work. Could He Xin not feel angry? But you also know, his relationship with Miao Miao is solid. It’s because of this that he’s been enduring. Miao Miao has talked to her parents many times, but it hasn’t worked. The moment Long Xing took over, he schemed to push He Xin out.”

“And I don’t think they’re done causing trouble.”

“What is He Xin doing now?” Yan Ge asked with concern.

Xu Kai explained, “There’s no way around it. He’s currently working at a sales company. I asked him to join my company as an experienced member of the sales department, but he refused. I suppose he couldn’t bear to lose face.”

Yan Ge had an idea and looked at Huangfu Yuchen. They both had limited manpower they could rely on. Up to now, they had been personally managing the farm. On one hand, they were getting a bit tired of it, and on the other, it was consuming their cultivation time. He thought highly of He Xin’s character and abilities. If they could bring him on board, not only would it give him an opportunity to showcase his talents, but it would also free up both of them. This could be considered a win-win situation.

Huangfu Yuchen understood his thoughts and also found it to be a good idea. He nodded in agreement.

Xu Kai guessed their thoughts and shook his head, “You want to invite him to help out at the farm? I think that’s too aggressive.”

Yan Ge laughed heartily and patted his shoulder, saying, “You never know, maybe my influence is greater than yours, Little Xu.”

Xu Kai protested, “If he agrees after turning me down, then I’ll make sure he buys me food from the farm for a week!”

Yan Ge laughed, “Hahaha… okay, I support you!”

The next day, after breakfast, Yan Ge intended to call He Xin and invite him to meet up.

As he opened his contacts, the Zhantian Vine suddenly flew in, swaying its head at him.

Yan Ge raised an eyebrow. He had instructed the Zhantian Vine to watch the farm’s entrance and notify him upon spotting any cultivators. Was there some development?

He extended his spiritual sense and saw a group of people entering the farm with tickets. They looked around and walked forward with a clear direction in mind.

Among them were Wu Meng, Li Yue, and Xiong Wei whom he had seen before. Yan Ge smiled in amusement and muttered to himself, “It seems they are quite ungrateful.”

Li Yue’s group arrived at Division Two area and found the door open.

He Chuanfeng saw a young man seated behind a desk with a book spread out in front of him. The young man was engrossed in it, and only raised his head when he heard movement at the door.

He Chuanfeng seized him up and his eyes brightened. He could tell at a glance that this young man had remarkable aptitude, even better than Li Yue’s.

“Master, he’s the one who sealed our true qi!” Li Yue pointed at Yan Ge, his chin raised and his eyes squinted, looking very arrogant now that he had found a backer.

Yan Ge also observed He Chuanfeng. This man wasn’t that old. He looked around fifty, with a robust physique and a kind face. His eyes were particularly gentle, not like someone who couldn’t distinguish right from wrong.

Nodding at Li Yue, Xiong Wei, and Wu Meng, Yan Ge asked, “You three are here again? Did you come to offer more money?”

“Don’t get cocky!” Li Yue shouted, “This is my Master, He Chuanfeng, the head of Mimon Mountain Sect! Don’t be disrespectful!”

Yan Ge nodded again but remained seated, “So, you’re Sect Master He. What brings you here?”

He Chuanfeng couldn’t discern Yan Ge’s cultivation level and bowed politely, “I wouldn’t dare. According to my three disciples here, there’s a farm with abundant spiritual energy in the Imperial City. This old man came to witness it.”

Li Yue looked at him in surprise, “Master…” Wasn’t he here to seek revenge for them?

Yan Ge smiled, “I see, you’re welcome then. However, Sect Master He should be aware of our rules. Dining is possible, but lodging is out of the question.”

“I understand.”

“Senior Brother.” A senior disciple who had been standing beside He Chuanfeng stepped forward. This elder was close to sixty, small and thin, with white eyebrows almost covering his eyes, yet his eyes gleamed through.

He Chuanfeng glanced at him, “Junior Brother Min, what’s the matter?”

Min Liye spoke softly, “The incident where Li Yue and the others were beaten up and had their true qi sealed has spread. If we let it go, where would our Mimon Mountain’s face be?”

He Chuanfeng furrowed his brows. As Min Liye said, if they let Li Yue’s incident go without taking any action, Mimon Mountain Sect would become a laughingstock in the cultivation world. However, he felt it wasn’t wise to escalate tensions with Fengshan Farm. The spiritual energy here was tempting, and even if he didn’t think for himself, he had to consider the other disciples in his sect. When it came down to it, this issue stemmed from the recklessness of Li Yue and the other two.

“Let’s have a meal first, then we’ll decide.”

Min Liye frowned. His senior brother was too cowardly. With so many of them, couldn’t they defeat a young man in his twenties? From what he knew, just over two years ago, Yan Ge was an ordinary person. Even if he was a genius, how high could his cultivation have reached in just two years? Li Yue and the other two were just incompetent.

He didn’t mention the Idea of seizing the farm yet. This farm could operate in the Imperial City, so it surely had some background. As long as they defeated Yan Ge and made him yield, gaining a chance to stay on the farm for an extended period, everything would be resolved.

Thinking this, he didn’t bother communicating with He Chuanfeng and addressed Yan Ge impolitely, “Mr. yan, we can’t just let you go after injuring our sect’s disciples. We hope you can provide an explanation.”

He Chuanfeng disapproved and glared at him, but since the words had been spoken, he couldn’t undermine his junior brother’s face in front of so many disciples. He could only remain silent, giving the impression of tacit agreement.

Yan Ge chuckled lightly, crossing his arms, “What kind of explanation do you want?”

Min Liye stood before him with his hands behind his back, “As long as you can apologize to my three disciples, we’ll consider the last incident a misunderstanding.”

“Oh?” Yan Ge lowered his gaze to his book, nonchalantly saying, “And if I refuse?”

Min Liye’s eyes narrowed, “Then I’ll personally seek justice for my disciples.”

“You’re welcome to try.” Yan Ge turned a page.

“You arrogant brat!” Min Liye turned his hand into a palm and pushed it out forcefully, a tremendous surge of energy directed at Yan Ge’s face.

He Chuanfeng and the other disciples quickly moved aside.

Without lifting his head, Yan Ge picked up his book and casually waved it like shooing away a mosquito, blocking Min Liye’s palm wind and rebounding the force.

Min Liye’s hand went numb, and he hastily leaped backward to avoid his own attack’s counterforce.

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Min Liye used only fifty percent of his strength, but he was still easily countered by Yan Ge. This made him realize that he had underestimated Yan Ge. His heart trembled, and he abandoned the idea of probing, instead directly revealing his weapon.

Yan Ge looked at the cotton-candy-like object in Min Liye's right hand with curiosity. What kind of weapon was this?

Seeing his reaction, Li Yue appeared quite pleased, as if Yan Ge had been defeated by Min Liye.

He Chuanfeng's brow furrowed slightly, showing more seriousness than before. Min Liye's weapon was called "Light Mist and Flying Sand." It was a treasure left behind by a senior in the cultivation world. It was crafted using two rare materials: ice silkworm silk and polar ice.

Even though he was sparring with a less powerful opponent, Yan Ge didn't dare to be careless. The "Light Mist and Flying Sand" possessed not only powerful killing ability but also toxicity.

The other disciples moved aside in order not to obstruct Min Liye.

Min Liye's feet moved in a peculiar pattern on the ground, springing up like a sly rabbit. The "cotton candy" in his right hand faded in color, turning into a thin mist that seemed alive as it lunged toward Yan Ge. Countless brown sand-like particles were mixed within the mist, rushing towards Yan Ge at a very fast speed.

In the blink of an eye, the mist was right in front of Yan Ge. Suddenly, it dispersed like a thin veil, revealing a net of intricate holes that were as fine as a honeycomb, descending from above Yan Ge's head.

Yan Ge sensed faint layers of energy fluctuations. He frowned and his figure flickered, instantly appearing several meters away. Unexpectedly, those sand-like particles were alive—they were swarming insects!

Min Liye's eyebrows twitched, a hint of triumph in his expression. These insects weren't ordinary insects; they were called "Ice Worms." They lived within the polar ice, which resonated uniquely with the polar ice material in the weapon. Since the "Light Mist and Flying Sand" recognized Min Liye as its master, there was a connection between him and the insects, so they were under his control.

Thinking that Yan Ge was frightened, Min Liye attacked once again, and made the mist surge over to where he stood.

Yan Ge observed the swarm of insects with disgust. He skillfully dodged, not letting the insects touch him. Raising his right hand, he expelled condensed true qi from his palm. It solidified into water and rapidly heated up, emitting hot steam. It took on the shape of a fishing net, enclosed the mist, and then condensed and compressed it—the process seemed slow, but it all happened in an instant. The mist was compressed into a grape-sized brown bead, and was then heated until it shattered into fragments!

He Chuanfeng looked at Yan Ge in horror. Such strong true qi!

Li Yue and the others were dumbfounded, staring at Yan Ge in shock, even forgetting their fear.

Yan Ge examined the shattered pieces on the ground. He would need someone to clean up the office later, preferably washing it with water.

Min Liye was both shocked and angered. His eyes glinted with a mix of emotions as he gazed at Yan Ge. His eyes were bloodshot with red veins, bulging terrifyingly, as if they were about to pop out of their sockets.

"Yan Ge! I won't spare you!" Min Liye shouted, pouncing on Yan Ge like an enraged lion.

A trace of killing intent flashed in Yan Ge's eyes.

He Chuanfeng realized the situation was bad and moved forward, simultaneously delivering a palm strike to Min Liye's chest.

Yan Ge understood his intention and cast a casual glance his way, thinking: Too late.

He struck out with his palm, and Min Liye let out a muffled groan, falling to the ground.

He Chuanfeng's plan was good: Min Liye had angered Yan Ge, so he wounded Min Liye first, helping him evade Yan Ge's attack. Also, since he had personally dealt with Min Liye, Yan Ge probably wouldn't make another lethal move. After all, the Mimon Mountain was a sect, while Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were alone.

Unfortunately, Yan Ge knew that Min Liye had developed resentment towards him. Even sparing his life wouldn't earn gratitude so he had to eliminate any potential threat. His prior warning when he sealed Li Yue and the others' true qi didn't serve the effect of killing chicken to warn the monkeys, but Min Liye came at the right time.

Poor Min Liye. Having been struck twice, how could he survive? He lifted his head stiffly, looked at He Chuanfeng, and then at Yan Ge, closed his eyes, and died.

He Chuanfeng's chest felt heavy, Min Liye's look was filled with suspicion and hatred. Apparently, he hadn't understood his well-intentioned intervention. Min Liye didn't understand, would the disciples understand his actions?

Yan Ge felt a bit sympathetic for Min Liye, but only a bit.

He glanced at Li Yue, Xiong Wei, and Wu Meng. His expression seemed friendly, and his tone was as if chatting with friends casually, "I didn't do anything to you guys last time. Do you think I'm kind?"

Only now did Li Yue and Wu Meng snap out of their stupor, instinctively taking a few steps back, trembling uncontrollably.

He Chuanfeng took a step forward, “Fellow cultivator Yan, considering that one of my sect members has been harmed, please let go of the past.”

Yan Ge waved his hand without looking at him, “I spared you because the number of cultivators in the country is extremely limited, but unfortunately, you don’t know how to appreciate it. This time, I won’t do anything to you, but I’ll prepare coffins for you, waiting for your third visit. Hehe, the feng shui at the foot of the western side of Fengshan is quite good.”

Li Yue and Wu Meng were weak in the legs and had pale faces. They didn’t even dare to look at him.

Xiong Wei calmed down a bit, after all, he had never taken action against Yan Ge.

He Chuanfeng sighed and bowed to Yan Ge, “I’m sorry for the trouble, we’ll take our leave.”

His disciples carried Min Liye’s body and left in a hurry.

Passersby asked what had happened to Min Liye with concern, and He Chuanfeng simply said he had drunk too much. Since there were no external injuries on Min Liye’s body, no one suspected anything.

After leaving the gate of the farm, He Chuanfeng looked back and sighed with regret. Unfortunately, Li Yue and the others were too impulsive, and Min Liye was too greedy. Otherwise, even if they just had a few meals at the farm and stayed for a day, they could have absorbed a considerable amount of spiritual energy.

“Let’s go.”

They hurried away, not noticing several people watching them from a distance.

“That old man Min Liye is being supported by two people. Could he be seriously injured?” One of the girls with shoulder-length hair in her twenties said gleefully.

The tall and thin young man beside her shook his head and said decisively, “He’s dead.”

“Oh?”

The others exchanged glances, their expressions becoming more solemn.

One of them said, “This farm is interesting. It seems we need to change our attitude.”

The girl flicked her hair and said, “Let’s not talk about this for now. Let’s go in, have a meal, and then decide. The farm might not allow cultivators to stay, but they didn’t say they wouldn’t treat cultivators to meals, tours, and entertainment.”

The others nodded and walked towards the farm leisurely.

Yan Ge watched them from a distance as they ate honestly and participated in activities. He paid no further attention to them, calling He Xin on the couch.

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At the peak of Mount Zhu

The area was covered in ice and snow, desolate and indifferent. Looking into the distance, it appeared as an invincible steel mountain, reflecting the blue of the sky. It was like a massive blue jade, it was truly breathtaking.

On this mountain was a secret cave entrance, inside of which were two individuals.

These two people seemed to be around thirty years old, dignified in appearance and somewhat similar, like a pair of brothers. The older one was chopping wood to start a fire. The younger one was sitting cross-legged on a blanket, emitting strands of cold air that formed a thin layer of frost. About half an hour later, he opened his eyes. There was a slight smile on his face, indicating his satisfaction with this training session’s results.
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Just as the two were about to speak, a shadow suddenly appeared at the entrance of the cave. They both jumped up instantly, standing side by side and staring warily in the direction of the entrance.

The figure at the entrance was a handsome young man, his expression icy and devoid of any emotion as he looked at them. Despite the deep winter weather and being on the peak of Mount Zhu, he was wearing only a windbreaker, seemingly unaffected by the cold. This made the two brothers even more cautious — this person's cultivation was undoubtedly much higher than theirs, and by a significant margin!

"Are you the Guo brothers?"

Guo Jian stared at him warily, "Who are you?"

"Huangfu Yuchen." Huangfu Yuchen's gaze fell upon the two. This pair of brothers was in perfect synchronization, they stood side by side, one was in a defensive posture, and the other in an offensive one.

"So, it's fellow cultivator Huangfu Yuchen."

Guo Jian was the one who asked, his tone very calm.

Guo Yi remained silent, evidently placing great trust in his elder brother.

Huangfu Yuchen: "Rest assured, I mean no harm. If I wanted to kill you, you would have died long ago."

Guo Jian and Guo Yi continued to fix their gaze on him, not speaking, but inwardly, they believed Huangfu Yuchen's words. They didn't recognize this person at all, so naturally, he couldn't be their enemy. He had come all this way to the snowy mountain for a reason.

With a swift movement, Huangfu Yuchen appeared in front of them. He placed his hands on their shoulders, and in an instant, they were out of the cave. At the same time, everything in the cave, apart from the bonfire, flew out and disappeared.

Guo Jian and Guo Yi were greatly shocked! This man's hand seemed to immobilize them, rendering them unable to move.

Guo Jian was about to speak, but his vision blurred, and he suddenly found himself in a spacious living room.

Sensing the abundant spiritual energy in the area, the two exchanged astonished glances. Were they still in Huaxia? How could there be a place with such abundant spiritual energy in Huaxia?

Guo Jian asked, "What exactly do you want?"

Huangfu Yuchen didn't release them from the immobilization. He sat down on the couch and poured three cups of tea with ease, "This is Fengshan, the capital's imperial city. My farm is set up with a spiritual gathering formation, so there's plenty of spiritual energy here. Because of this, a lot of cultivators have been attracted. However, the farm has rules. We only host cultivators for meals and entertainment, not for long stays. My partner and I are usually too busy to supervise the entering cultivators, so I thought of hiring you two as assistants. The advantage for you is that you can freely use the spiritual energy here for cultivation. What do you think?" He learned about the existence of these two individuals from Wang Zhiyuan.

Guo Jian and Guo Yi were surprised.

"Why us?" Guo Yi asked. He was somewhat intrigued, but more skeptical.

Huangfu Yuchen explained, "I heard that the two of you have a deep bond and trust each other. When one of you is working, the other can go into seclusion, that's one point. Second, you two are independent cultivators without any affiliation to a sect or faction, so you don't have any complicated interpersonal relationships with the cultivation world that could bring trouble. Third, you both are in the Middle of the Foundation Establishment stage, so your cultivation levels are not low and can handle regular cultivators." These were the three reasons he chose them. As for their character, it was secondary. In case Guo Jian and Guo Yi had ulterior motives, he and Yan Ge had control over the situation.

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“Why should we believe you?” Guo Jian said coldly. He and Guo Yi were indeed independent cultivators. By now, they were both in their thirties. When they were in their teens, they had encountered a storm while herding cattle and took shelter in a mountain stream at the foot of the mountain. They unintentionally discovered a hidden cave, where they found a cultivation manual, thus, they began their journey on the path of cultivation.

Fortunately, their talents were decent, and in just over a decade, they reached the Middle stage of the Foundation Establishment stage. Due to their obsession with cultivation, they hadn’t even married. The fact that Huangfu Yuchen knew so much about them made them uneasy.

Huangfu Yuchen smiled faintly, “As you saw earlier, I can teleport. Only my partner and I know this secret. Do you think I would let you leave alive?”

Guo Jian and Guo Yi were taken aback. Huangfu Yuchen could kill them as easily as crushing ants.

After a moment, Guo Jian said, “We agree.”

“Big brother?” Guo Yi was surprised.

Guo Jian shook his head at him. In their current situation, they had no choice but to agree.

With a wave of his right hand, Huangfu Yuchen released them from the immobilization.

Guo Jian and Guo Yi exchanged glances, approached, and each picked up a cup of tea to take a sip.

Huangfu Yuchen raised his hand again, and the various items they had brought from the cave neatly appeared on the ground.

Guo Jian and Guo Yi were astonished once more. Although they were independent cultivators, they had interacted with other cultivators and had a decent knowledge of cultivation. They were aware that Huangfu Yuchen must possess a storage artifact. In the current cultivation world, ancient weapons were scarce, and storage artifacts were even rarer, only found in those well-established sects. However, they had never heard of Huangfu Yuchen's name before. Who exactly was he?

Huangfu Yuchen dialed a number on his phone, "Xiao Ge, I'm back. Where are you?"

There was no reply, but the door opened.

Huangfu Yuchen looked up as Yan Ge entered, waving his phone. He looked at Huangfu Yuchen with a smile and then glanced at Guo Jian and Guo Yi.

"These are the people I've invited over for the second service office. The two brothers Guo Jian and Guo Yi," Huangfu Yuchen walked over to Yan Ge and took the fruit basket in his hands that contained oranges and apples, each one full and ripe, and the apples a vibrant red.

"Hello, I'm Yan Ge. Try some of the fruits from the farm," Yan Ge said as he casually grabbed two pieces of fruit from the basket and handed them to Guo Jian and Guo Yi.

Guo Jian and Guo Yi took the fruits in silence, but Yan Ge had an amiable appearance and a smile, it made it hard to feel any dislike towards him.

Yan Ge then took out two spirit stones from his spatial storage and handed them over, saying with a smile, "Here's a little welcome gift. I hope we can have a pleasant cooperation in the future." He knew that Huangfu Yuchen's "invitation" certainly wasn't a true invitation, but he wasn't opposed to this manner of interaction. In the world of cultivation, strength was respected. Even if Guo Jian and Guo Yi were reluctant, they had no means to resist.

Moreover, there was no ill intent towards them from him and Huangfu Yuchen. If they could peacefully coexist, that would be even better.

Before they even took the spirit stones, Guo Jian and Guo Yi sensed the surging spiritual energy.

Guo Yi looked at Ya Ge in astonishment, and asked uncertainly, “Could this be the legendary spirit stone?”

Yan Ge nodded, “But only for today.”

Guo Jian and Guo Yi exchanged a glance. There was no harm in accepting benefits, especially since they had no hope of escaping. They could only take it step by step.

Huangfu Yuchen took a map from the coffee table and handed it to Guo Jian, “This is the map of the farm. You’ll be working in the second service office from now on. Your living quarters are behind it-it’s two rooms and a living room. My partner and I won’t interfere with your freedom, but there are two requirements: first, you can’t disclose anything about me and my partner; second, no matter how you arrange your schedules, at least one of you must be working. Working hours are from 7 AM to 10 PM. Sundays are off.”

Guo Jian and Guo Yi accepted the map and nodded.

Yan Ge took out a duffel bag from his spatial storage and handed it to them, patting their shoulders with a smile, “The farm is quite interesting. You can leave your luggage in your lodging first and then explore around. Tomorrow, you’ll start working officially.”

Guo Jian and Guo Yi put their simple belongings into the duffel bag, left the room, and glanced back. Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were sitting close together, chatting and laughing. For now, it seemed that the two of them didn’t have any ill intent. The two brothers hoped it would stay that way in the future.

“Baby, have you talked to He Xin?” Huangfu Yuchen peeled an apple and asked Yan Ge.

Yan Ge checked the time, turned on the TV, and replied, “Not yet. We’ve arranged to meet tomorrow night for drinks. Will you come?”

Huangfu Yuchen said, “Sure.”

Yan Ge leaned against his leg, found a comfortable position, and got ready to continue watching his favorite TV show.

The next day, the snow fell even more heavily, covering everything in a white blanket. When you step in it, the snow would reach halfway up the calves.

Difeng Road had also been thoroughly covered. Yan Ge arranged for the snow to be cleared, ensuring that it didn’t impede the public transportation.

Business at the farm was still thriving.

As evening approached, Yan and Huangfu Yuchen took the bus into the city. They were going to have a drink, so driving wasn’t an option.

Most of the frequent visitors to the farm had gotten to know the two proprietors quite well. Seeing the two handsome men board the bus one after the other and take seats in the back row, they found it quite pleasing to the eye. Some people still had reservations about same-sex couples, but both of these men were handsome and impeccable manners. Whether male or female, those who saw them couldn’t help but steal a few more glances, mostly out of curiosity.

This was Yan Ge’s first time taking a bus since returning to earth. He looked out of the window curiously, watching the snowflakes fall one by one.

Huangfu Yuchen brushed the snow off Yan Ge’s beanie and scarf. His face remained expressionless, but his eyes held a tender smile.

A few young girls who had been stealing glances blushed and their hearts raced.

They entered the city and then took a taxi to DREAM Bar. DREAM Bar was an elegant establishment, with soft music playing and low conversations among the patrons.

As soon as they walked in, they drew the attention of many people. They murmured with their friends, most of them praising Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen's looks

He Xin had arrived earlier and waved when he saw them.

The three chatted briefly. After Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen ordered drinks, He Xin smiled and spoke up, "Is there a reason you two wanted to meet me alone?"

They were all friends, and there was no need to beat around the bush so Yan Ge spoke directly, "We want to offer you a high-paying position to help us manage the farm. Are you interested?"

He Xin was about to speak but was interrupted by Yan Ge. "Don't rush to refuse. Listen to me first. We understand that even if you manage to take back the department store, it will still be quite a hassle. Who knows what kind of situation you and your in-laws will end up in, Miao Miao might be caught in the middle. In that case, why not start your own business independently?"

He Xin leaned back in his chair, took a sip of wine, and sighed, "It's not that I haven't thought about it. It's just…"

Huangfu Yuchen added, "It's just that you don't have the funds, and you're unwilling to borrow from friends. Our idea is to hire you as the CEO of the farm and the two of us will step back from managing it directly. Your annual salary will certainly not be low. After a couple of years, the funds to start your own company will be mostly sufficient."

“That’s one aspect. On the other hand—” Yan Ge took over, “as you can see, many of the people visiting the farm are important people. Once you become the CEO, you can quickly build a new network of connections. Coupled with your previous connections, do you think you’ll have trouble starting a company?”

He Xin looked at them for a moment, then laughed. “You two have successfully persuaded me.”

He raised his glass. “Thank you, my two brothers! I won’t say more unnecessary words.” He then downed his drink. How could he not know that Yan Ge was offering him a helping hand? He would remember this favor.

With the main topic discussed, the three relaxed and enjoyed their drinks, chatting casually about recent interesting events and gossip.

Not far behind them, there was a commotion. Yan Ge recognized the voice of one of the people and turned to look over. His eyebrows raised in surprise.

Yan Yan? And Xiao Shuai. Yan Yan was holding onto Xiao Shuai’s arm, saying something to him. Xiao Shuai seemed patient while listening, but a trace of impatience flashed in his eyes.

What was going on?

“Brother Xiao, I’m hungry. Let’s go have supper,” Yan Yan looked up and smiled at Xiao Shuai.

“No, I have something to do. It’s getting late, you should head home,” Xiao Shuai felt he was really naive. He didn’t know why, but this kid had latched onto him. Before he agreed to help Huangfu Yuchen bring down the Yan family business, he had only seen Yan Yan once. After agreeing to help Huangfu Yuchen, he thoroughly investigated the Yan family and found out that Yan Yan was Yan Jiaqiang’s younger son. To avoid further complications, he hadn’t intended to get too close to Yan Yan. But for some reason, Yan Yan suddenly started clinging to him, and whether he wanted it

or not, Yan Yan would act spoiled towards him, sometimes even showing a coquettish side. It made him avoid him as much as possible. Unexpectedly, they met at the bar today, and he was once again accosted by him.

Seeing Yan Ge look back, Huangfu Yuchen followed his gaze and raised his eyebrows with interest.

Yan Ge didn't want to get involved with Yan Yan. He quickly looked away, feeling puzzled. Wasn't Yan Yan heterosexual? But the way he looked at Xiao Shuo was very strange, did he think too much?

Huangfu Yuchen grabbed the back of his neck, secretly caressed it twice, and took the opportunity of speaking close to his ear to nibble on his earlobe. "Xiao Shuai is one hundred percent straight. Looks like there will be quite a show."

Yan Ge's mouth twitched. If Yan Yan really had feelings for Xiao Shuai, the Yan family was about to get lively again.

Both of them pretended not to notice Yan Yan and Xiao Shuai.

As they had their backs to Xiao Shuai's direction, he didn't notice them and left the bar. Yan Yan chased after him.

He Xin also noticed, clicked his tongue, and sighed. The current Yan family was pitiful (excluding Yan Ge who had already distanced himself), he felt really sympathetic for Yan Weifeng.

After sitting for a while, the three of them left. Whether they returned home early or late, it didn't matter to Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen since their loved one was by their side. He Xin had a family waiting for him, so he headed home.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen left the bar and hailed a taxi by the roadside.

Suddenly, a black sedan skidded on the snowy ground and rushed toward Yan Ge.

Huangfu Yuchen acted quickly, he wrapped his arm around Yan Ge’s waist, and pulled him back a few steps, steadying them both.

The sedan came to a screeching halt about three meters away. A tall man stepped out from the driver’s seat and approached Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

“Sorry—Yan Ge?” The man started speaking and suddenly called out Yan Ge’s name.

Yan Ge felt a sense of familiarity upon hearing his voice. He looked closely, paused for a moment, then let out an “Ah,” his expression turning into an awkward “ ” face. He glanced at Huangfu Yuchen guiltily.

“So it’s President Lin, hehehe, it’s been a while.”

Huangfu Yuchen narrowed his eyes and pinched Yan Ge’s waist hard. What was going on?

Yan Ge forced a dry laugh. This Lin Haoxuan was the man he secretly liked a long time ago. If he hadn’t appeared, he probably wouldn’t have even remembered him. ‘Damn it…’

The name of the man Yan Ge crushed on before transmigrating was mentioned before, but I recall a different from this… perhaps the author decided to change it or just forgot…

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“Long time no see.” Lin Haoxuan’s gaze skimmed Huangfu Yuchen’s hand that was on Yan Ge’s waist.

Yan Ge patted Huangfu Yuchen’s shoulder and spoke in a calm, cheerful tone, “This is my partner, Huangfu Yuchen.”

“Mr. Huangfu, it’s a pleasure to meet you.” Lin Haoxuan nodded at Huangfu Yuchen, “I apologize for earlier, I was in a rush and drove badly. I don’t have the chance to properly introduce myself today, so let’s arrange a meal to make up for it. Here’s my business card.”

Huangfu Yuchen took the business card and handed his own card to Lin Haoxuan. He gestured towards Lin Haoxuan’s car, “It’s okay. You and your friend seem to be in a hurry. We can chat some other time.”

A hint of surprise flashed in Lin Haoxuan’s eyes. There was so much frost on the car but this person could still tell someone was inside. He didn’t think much about it, nodded at the two and quickly left.

Yan Ge watched his departing car with a sense of sentimentality. Suddenly, he felt a pain in his waist. Turning around, he saw Huangfu Yuchen’s dark face, his narrowed eyes and pursed lips clearly displaying his displeasure.

Yan Ge quickly explained, “There’s nothing between him and me!”

“Is that so?” Huangfu Yuchen trusted Yan Ge and their relationship, so he believed that there couldn’t be anything between Yan Ge and Lin Haoxuan. However, seeing Yan Ge watching Lin Haoxuan’s departure like that made him uncomfortable. While there might not be anything between Yan Ge and Lin Haoxuan now, there probably was something in the past. What bothered

Huangfu Yuchen the most was that Yan Ge had shared many things about his life in this world but never mentioned Lin Haoxuan.

All of Yan Ge's previous cheerfulness faded, and he started feeling uneasy. He felt somewhat amused, but there was also a faint ache in his heart. He preferred seeing Huangfu Yuchen happy. Even though Huangfu Yuchen rarely laughed heartily, his entire presence could exude relaxation and tranquility.

Without explaining, he covered Huangfu Yuchen's ears and pressed his lips against Huangfu Yuchen's slightly cold ones, giving him a soft kiss. He then took his hands off and said, "The snow is getting heavier. Let's head home. I'll explain everything to you in detail."

Huangfu Yuchen didn't say anything, he put Yan Ge's hand in his pocket and held it tightly. They hailed a taxi and then transferred to a bus.

As soon as they returned home, Yan Ge turned to face Huangfu Yuchen. His expression was serious as he confessed, "Yuchen, there's really nothing between Lin Haoxuan and me. I met him at a party—"

Huangfu Yuchen was caught off guard by Yan Ge's sudden confession. The other party had not yet even put off his hat, scarf, and overcoat that were all covered in snow. His heart softened, and he couldn't help but smile. The emptiness he felt was now filled. He removed Yan Ge's beanie and tossed it aside, then cupped the back of his head, imprinting a gentle kiss on his wide eyes.

Yan Ge stared at Huangfu Yuchen's smiling dark eyes, and his lips involuntarily curled up. This Yuchen was so gentle.

Huangfu Yuchen kissed his lips again and removed his scarf, placing it on a nearby chair. He then held Yan Ge by the waist and led him to the bathroom, speaking in a relaxed tone, "Let's take a shower first."

Both of them took a hot shower and then returned in warm robes.

Yan Ge sat at the edge of the bed and Huangfu Yuchen sat behind him. The latter held a white towel and carefully dried Yan Ge's wet hair. He wore a blue towel around his own neck, preventing water droplets from his hair from falling onto the bed.

Yan Ge began explaining the situation between him and Lin Haoxuan in a casual tone, as if narrating someone else's story, "I realized my sexual orientation when I was in my first year of high school. However, I was seeking approval from my parents at that time and had no interest in dating. After graduating, I started my own company and was busy with its affairs, so I still didn't have the time."

Huangfu Yuchen's hand paused. 'So, that meant Lin Haoxuan might have been Xiao Ge's first love?'

Yan Ge gently patted his hand and continued, "I met Lin Haoxuan at a party. I was inexplicably drawn to him, but he had a partner at the time and their relationship was strong. So, I never showed my feelings. Later, I had contact with him due to work and occasionally saw him, but we never spoke. Not long before I was transported to Great Han, I accidentally found out his partner was cheating on him. I had thoughts about confessing, but…"

Huangfu Yuchen's hand slipped, tugging on a few of Yan Ge's hairs. Huangfu Yuchen came back to his senses and gently kissed the top of Yan Ge's head. "Sorry, baby, please continue."

"I was transported to Great Han before I could. I didn't intentionally hide the matter about Lin Haoxuan. A modern person traveling to ancient times has to face too many problems, deal with too many troubles. After entering the palace, I couldn't even think about the past, let alone think about telling you this. Later, I was busy with establishing the company and making money. I didn't have the time to think about the past. After we got together…"

A shallow smile appeared on Huangfu Yuchen's lips. The words "we got together" sounded so pleasant. He tossed the towel onto a chair, wrapped his arms around Yan Ge's waist, and felt a great calmness within him.

“After we got together, I couldn’t recall the past. The thing I thought about the most every day was you. How could I possibly remember Lin Haoxuan? If he didn’t appear today, I wouldn’t even think of him. It’s been nine years since we met, and we’ve been together for over eight years.” Yan Ge turned around and planted a kiss Huangfu Yuchen’s chin, then leaned against him in a relaxed manner. “Thinking back now, that infatuation at the time was truly inexplicable. I believe everyone encounters a few people in their lifetime, maybe you like someone who doesn’t like you, or maybe you don’t like someone who likes you. These are all normal. But there’s only one person that you can like and who likes you back. Finding this person among the countless people in the world and across different times and spaces, that’s the person destined for you. That’s the person you must treasure.”

He looked up at Huangfu Yuchen, his expression tender and his eyes warm.

“Baby, you’re my only true love.” Huangfu Yuchen’s heart felt as sweet as honey. He rolled over, pressing his lover beneath him. With a wave of his hand, the lights went out…

After the matter with Lin Haoxuan was revealed, the bond between Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen grew even stronger.

Lin Haoxuan later invited them to dinner, and the two went happily. Lin Haoxuan had also brought his partner along, a different one from before. This partner was two years younger than Lin Haoxuan. He was a renowned software engineer, and appeared to be much more reliable. The two of them were even planning to get married abroad after the New Year.

The four chatted happily throughout the whole dinner.

After resigning, He Xin came to Fengshan Farm and became its CEO. With Guo Jian and Guo Yi taking care of the cultivators visiting the farm, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen practically became hands-off managers.

After the New Year passed, their cultivation reached the early Crossing Tribulation stage. They continued their domestic travels, arriving at the highest mountain in the country, Mount Langma. Basking in the sun,

sipping beer, and enjoying the scenery on the snowy mountaintop, life couldn't be more relaxing.

They spent five to six days on the mountaintop before returning to the human world — specifically, to Province Y.

—"You are my little, little apple…"

Huangfu Yuchen's phone rang.

Yan Ge shook his head and walked to a shop by the roadside, planning to buy some local specialties to bring back for He Xin and Xu Kai.

"Xiao Shuai."

"We couldn't get through when we tried calling you guys before." Xiao Shuai's voice sounded playful over the phone, "So, where have you and Yan Ge been having fun?"

Huangfu Yuchen raised an eyebrow. They had been on the snowy mountain top; it would have been strange if they had a signal.

"Is something wrong?"

"Yes, something is." Xiao Shuai's tone turned serious, "I gave Yan Yan a light reprimand. You and Yan Ge don't mind, do you?"

"No." Huangfu Yuchen rarely gossiped but he couldn't help asking curiously, "What did he do to you?"

"Nonsense! What can he do to me?" Xiao Shuai laughed in exasperation, "I think he has a brain problem. I've told him countless times that I like women and that I have a girlfriend. Still, he insists on pestering me. Now it's even affecting my girlfriend. It's really infuriating. I pursued my girlfriend for four years. If he really manages to upset her, I will put him in compromising situations with a few different men and send the pictures to the Yan family." Xiao Shuai's voice turned cold. Liking men is fine, but clinging to a man who has a girlfriend is a dead-end path. He had long lost any sympathy for Yan Yan.

“I’ll pay the courier fee for you.” Huangfu Yuchen generously offered.

“Okay, I’ll send you the receipt afterward.” Xiao Shuai joked. They chatted for a few more moments before ending the call.

Huangfu Yuchen put his phone back into his pocket and looked up. The female shop owner of a fruit store was striking up a conversation with Yan Ge, a big smile on her face. He quickly walked over, pulling Yan Ge close, “Baby, it’s lunchtime. Where do you want to eat?”

Yan Ge tilted his chin and signaled forward, “There should be a restaurant up ahead. It’s not convenient to drive here, let’s just walk.”

They hadn‘t gone far when they exchanged a glance. The two people who had been following them since they entered the city were still there.

Unconcerned, the two of them found a restaurant and enjoyed some delicious local specialties. After leaving the restaurant, they drove to the outskirts and parked the car.

Stepping out of the car, they looked behind them curiously.

Following them were a child and an elderly man around sixty. The child was around eight or nine years old, with delicate features that showed he’ll be a handsome man in the future. He was dressed in what appeared to be a school uniform.

The old man had graying hair and a sharp spirit. His expression was impassive, and his fierce eyes were fixed on Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

“Who are you?” Yan Ge asked casually, not expecting a response.

Surprisingly, the old man answered, “I am Tong He. You should be able to tell that I’m also a cultivator. Someone offered a high price for me to kill you two. Don’t blame me; blame your farm for being so tempting, yet you’re unwilling to open it to cultivators.”

“Killing people with a child in tow? That’s not a good habit.” Yan Ge chuckled.

The child hid behind Tong He, not saying a word.

Tong He looked at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. Their faces showed no trace of tension and he grew wary. He glanced at the child. “This is my grandson, Tong Rui. I had no one to leave him with when I went on this trip, so I had no choice.”

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“Is that so?” Yan Ge remained noncommittal. He wasn’t really interested in dealing with Tong He. His current cultivation was at the early Crossing Tribulation stage, would it be interesting to fight against someone in the Foundation Establishment stage? Not at all.

He turned to look at Huangfu Yuchen, a signal that seemed to say, “It’s your turn,” then sat at the front of the car and took out a banana to eat.

Huangfu Yuchen felt that things couldn’t go on like this. He and Yan Ge had come to Earth mainly for leisure, and establishing the farm was meant to counter the Yan family. The fact that those cultivators were coveting the farm was getting quite annoying.

He walked over to Yan Ge, leaned in, and took a bite of the banana. “I’ve got an idea.”

“What idea?” Yan Ge asked.

Huangfu Yuchen explained, “Who has the highest cultivation level in the country? If we defeat him, others won’t dare to bother us.”

Tong He’s pupils contracted. ‘What audacious words!’

Yan Ge stroked his chin and licked the banana off his lips, “Good idea. But won’t it be too high profile?”

“Are you afraid of being high profile?” Huangfu Yuchen looked at him with a smile.

Yan Ge smiled as well. “Afraid of what?”

The two of them decided on their plan and moved to get into the car.

Since Tong He had taken up this job, he had to follow through. Otherwise, what face would he have left in the cultivation world? Seeing them about to leave, he quickly dashed over, launching a surprise attack on Yan Ge from behind.

Yan Ge acted as if he didn’t notice. He opened the car door, and got in.

Huangfu Yuchen delivered a swift palm strike behind him. The move was as elusive as the wind, and it hit Tong He right in the chest.

Tong He was horrified. He retreated three or four steps and had to press his feet tightly against the ground to stabilize himself. The friction between his shoe soles and the ground made a squeaking sound, even emitting a faint puff of smoke. His feet were also burning.

Huangfu Yuchen turned around to get in the car. However, the child suddenly rushed toward him, launching an unexpected ambush. His speed was like a meteor crashing down, the momentum like a rolling wave surging in, filled with killing intent.

Without even turning his head, Huangfu Yuchen lifted his right hand and condensed his true qi into a sword. With a gentle swing, he struck Tong Rui’s waist.

Tong Rui fell silently to the ground. His upper and lower body suddenly began to change, elongating gradually. His childish face transformed into a weathered appearance.

He was actually an adult who had practiced a technique to disguise himself as a child. He intended to ambush Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge from the shadows, catching them off guard. However, fate played its hand.

Tong He stared at Huangfu Yuchen in horror. His hands were trembling slightly, and his heart was like ashes.

“You, deliver a message to the cultivator with the highest cultivation level here. Three days from now, we’ll be waiting atop Mount Baichang.”

Huangfu Yuchen delivered these words coldly.

Tong He thought he was destined to die. He watched their car disappear from his sight before finally releasing his tension, falling to the ground with his back hunched. He knew that fear had taken root in his heart. Unless he could kill Huangfu Yuchen, further progress in his cultivation path would be nearly impossible.

He remained seated for a long time before standing up, exhaling lightly, and hurrying away.

Mount Baichang was located in the northern part of the country. Even though it was now March, the air was still chilly, and the mountain was covered in gleaming white snow. Even if there was a commotion here, it wouldn’t attract the attention of ordinary people.

By the time Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge arrived, quite a number of people had gathered on the mountain. If they hadn’t recognized that all these people were cultivators, they would have thought they were in the wrong place. A quick glance revealed around a hundred or more individuals.

Yan Ge was surprised. Wang Zhiyuan had mentioned that there were slightly over a hundred cultivators in China. Were they all here now? Upon further thought, it made sense. The allure of the farm was too great, and these cultivators naturally wanted to know the strength of both him and Huangfu Yuchen, and whether they could be challenged.

They walked amidst the gazes of the onlookers and calmly ascended to the mountaintop.

There were shrewd people among the cultivators; at a glance, it was evident that Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge were calm and their aura didn’t radiate the slightest trace of true qi, almost as if they were ordinary people. This showed that the two were quite formidable and the cultivators felt excited yet uneasy. Excited, as they were about to witness a splendid battle; uneasy,

as if even the highest-level cultivator couldn’t defeat Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge, their hopes for the spiritual energy of the farm would be shattered.

Where there were smart people, there were foolish ones. Some cultivators seemed dismissive. In their eyes, Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge were just some youngsters who had popped up from nowhere. Especially Yan Ge, who had been an ordinary person a little over two years ago. How much could his cultivation have possibly advanced in just two years? Head Elder Yuan would definitely be able to defeat them and show them their place.

The anticipatory gazes of the crowd were directed towards a middle-aged man standing solidly at the mountaintop, his eyes were closed as if resting. Looking down at his feet, one could see that he hadn’t sunk even half an inch into the snow. Even the minuscule snowflakes fluttered around him, avoiding him as if in awe, falling silently to the ground.

The middle-aged man heard the commotion, opened his eyes slightly, and cast a fleeting glance downward. His expression was calm, his gaze tranquil, exuding a righteous spirit.

He was undoubtedly the cultivator with the acknowledged highest level of cultivation in China — Yuan Luoheng, the head of Danyang Palace. At this moment, his cultivation was at the late Golden Core stage.

Single-mindedly devoted to cultivation, Yuan Luoheng rarely concerned himself with worldly matters. Hearing that someone was challenging him, he had to respond. If he didn’t, outsiders might think he was afraid. He saw that he couldn’t discern Huangfu Yuchen’s and Yan Ge’s cultivation levels, and he had a bad premonition, but he remained unfazed.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen stood before Yuan Luoheng, and noticed that Tong He was also present.

Tong He stood quietly not far away, expressionless, as if he had grown indifferent to something, probably deeply affected by his previous defeat.

How could something this big in the cultivation world be hidden from the shadow operatives department force? Ji Chang, Ruan Mingwei, He Hong,

and Zhang Jian were also there, trying to minimize their presence. As Yan Ge's gaze swept over them, the four nodded respectfully.

"Fellow Cultivator Yan, Fellow Cultivator Huangfu," Yuan Luoheng nodded slightly, very composed. "I have heard of your great reputations. I'm fortunate to learn from you."

"Fellow Cultivator Yuan, pleased to meet you," Yan Ge smiled gently. "We've been a bit presumptuous this time. If it weren't for some people repeatedly causing trouble with us, we wouldn't have disturbed your cultivation. We hope you won't take offense."

Seeing that Yan Ge was easy to talk to, Yuan Luoheng pondered for a moment, and responded, "Fengshan Farm is indeed privately owned by the two of you, that's beyond question. However, Fellow Cultivator Yan, you're also a cultivator and should understand the aspirations of fellow cultivators. I fear that in the future, conflicts with Fengshan Farm might persist. I believe opening the farm to cultivators wouldn't be a bad idea. I trust that fellow cultivators will possess sufficient resources to exchange."

On hearing this, everyone's gaze shifted onto Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, and they voiced their agreement, their eyes filled with eagerness.

Huangfu Yuchen observed coldly. He and Xiao Ge had intended to compromise, but the specifics would be decided by them.

Yan Ge gestured noncommittally. "We can talk more after you've defeated me."

Yuan Luoheng nodded. "Very well. Please."

The others quickly retreated to a distance. Yuan Luoheng was in the Golden Core stage, and his formidable power was not something those of lower cultivation levels like them could withstand.

Huangfu Yuchen only stepped back four or five paces before he stopped retreating altogether.

The cultivators frowned. Was he planning to secretly aid Yan Ge?

Yan Ge chuckled inwardly at their assumptions, but still directed Huangfu Yuchen, “Yuchen, step back a bit more.”

Only then did Huangfu Yuchen take a few more steps back, staying two paces closer than the other spectators.

Yan Ge addressed Yuan Luoheng, “Fellow Cultivator Yuan, please.”

Yuan Luoheng’s two junior disciples, Liu Yuandao and Gong Zhicheng, wore displeased expressions. They noticed that Yan Ge didn’t even remove his hat, as if he didn’t take their master seriously.

Yuan Luoheng remained calm, not a hint of fluctuation in his expression or gaze. He nodded and said, “Since that’s the case, I won’t hold back.”

With that, he made a semi-circular motion, arriving in front of Yan Ge and launching a punch.

This punch was as fast as lightning, and its force was astonishing.

Even those standing behind Yan Ge felt it, as if a tall stone wall were collapsing toward them. Snow on the ground also burst into the air, as if someone were vigorously using an industrial fan. The snow struck their faces like they were being hit by small stones. It was stinging and painful.

Liu Yuandao hurriedly shouted, “Step back even further!”

The cultivators quickly retreated nearly a mile.

Liu Yuandao and Gong Zhicheng, relying on their high cultivation levels, remained in place without moving, frowning as they looked at Yan Ge.

Yan Ge calmly raised his hand, and the snow on the ground was pulled up as if it were a piece of white cloth, forming a barrier in front of him. He casually struck his palm against this barrier, and the “white cloth” instantly solidified into a snowball, shooting toward Yuan Luoheng like a cannonball.

Yuan Luoheng quickly stepped back, but the snowball was fast. In an instant, it reached him, almost hitting his chest. He leaned backward just in time, and the snowball whooshed past him, making a “boom” as it collided with a mature pine tree about ten meters away.

The pine tree trembled violently, and the accumulated snow on it burst out like fireworks, leaving not a trace of snow behind. The towering green pine shed its snowy cover, its verdant green contrasting sharply with the surrounding white ice and snow.

Before the onlookers could recover from their astonishment, they heard a “crack” sound. The pine tree had snapped, and the break was so clean, as if it had been cut with a single horizontal stroke of a blade!

The crowd involuntarily sucked in a cold breath. With their strength, they could break a tree as thick as that, but Yan Ge had done it with a snowball, and from such a distance. It was evident just how immense the power contained within the snowball was!

The expressions of Liu Yuandao and Gong Zhicheng turned solemn at this moment.

The leaders of several other sects also wore somewhat grave expressions. While there had been conflicts between their sects and Danyang Palace in the past due to the competition for cultivation resources, they now stood on Yuan Luoheng’s side. If Yuan Luoheng defeated Yan Ge, they might still have a chance to negotiate with him. However, if Yuan Luoheng lost, they would be faced with a substantial opportunity, yet they couldn’t seize it. Wouldn’t they feel stifled for the rest of their lives?

The situation was not looking good. They exchanged glances and focused even more intently on Yan Ge and Yuan Luoheng.

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Yan Ge's perfect counterattack didn't surprise Yuan Luoheng, as he wasn't sure about the depth of Yan Ge's cultivation. This move was merely a test.

Yuan Luoheng attacked again, his right fist leading the way. As he struck, he twisted forward, employing a clever angle to assault Yan Ge.

This was the "Startling Snake Enters the Grass" technique from Danyang Palace's Snake Fist. Yuan Luoheng's right arm moved like a serpent, shooting, twisting, and drilling, aiming for Yan Ge's heart. If Yuan Luoheng's figure hadn't vanished, everyone would have mistaken him for a snake, his movements were so swift.

As the fist neared Yan Ge, it abruptly opened, resembling the jaws of a fierce serpent ready to bite.

A cold sensation surged in Yan Ge's heart. He shifted his weight, like a slender boat gliding across turbulent waters, raised his right arm with his fingers splayed like claws, and caught Yuan Luoheng's wrist.

Yuan Luoheng tugged with force, but Yan Ge's arm remained unmoved.

Yan Ge exerted strength through his right hand, and a surge of true qi flowed into Yuan Luoheng's arm. Yuan Luoheng trembled and swiftly retreated. His lips parted and his true qi congealed into a crystalline white sword of Qi that shot out like lightning.

Yan Ge executed a series of steps on the ground, reappearing behind Yuan Luoheng. His right hand grabbed Yuan Luoheng's shoulder blade.

Yuan Luoheng was immobilized and he was startled. He sighed and said calmly, "Yuan has lost."

In just a few moves? The cultivators gaped at Yan Ge in astonishment.

Yan Ge smiled faintly and released his grip. “I accept your surrender.”

Yuan Luoheng cupped his hands. “May I ask what stage Fellow Daoist Yan’s cultivation has reached?”

Yan Ge looked modest, his gaze seemingly absent as it swept over a distant spot. “I recently formed the nascent infant soul.”

Yuan Luoheng exclaimed, “Yuan has been impolite. So, Cultivator Yan has already reached the Nascent Soul stage.”

Yan Ge smiled but didn’t answer and walked toward Huangfu Yuchen.

Perhaps due to his victory, he felt quite relaxed. Just like before, his aura was completely concealed, as if he were an ordinary person.

However, at this moment, a gray figure streaked through the air like a shooting star, heading swiftly toward his back. The sharp killing intent compressed into a pointed Qi arrow, piercing toward his heart.

An ambush!

Yuan Luoheng was taken aback. He was about to warn, but Yan Ge continued walking toward Huangfu Yuchen, his speed unbroken. A silver flash of light emanated from his right hand and he swept it backward. When the radiance descended, and the silver light faded, nobody could comprehend what had just occurred.

A gray-clothed person let out a miserable cry, crashing heavily to the ground, a large hole in their abdomen, crimson blood staining the snowy ground.

“Zhao Chuanjin, a demonic cultivator?” Yuan Luoheng identified the person with astonishment. “You’ve already reached the Nascent Soul stage?”

The other cultivators stirred, their faces marked with shock. Zhao Chuanjin's cultivation had not been much lower than Yuan Luoheng's before. It was unimaginable that he had entered the Nascent Soul stage without them realizing it. Not only that, Yan Ge had defeated him so effortlessly!

Someone remembered the recent auction. Could it be that the person who had bought the Nascent Infant Pill was Zhao Chuanjin?

"You, didn't you claim to be in the Nascent Soul stage… despicable…" Zhao Chuanjin glared at Yan Ge, as if he wished to devour him alive. Anger and fear filled his eyes, his aura growing weaker.

Yan Ge raised an eyebrow, put his hands behind his back and looked at him with amusement. "It seems like you didn't learn your language well. I said I recently formed the Nascent Infant Soul. I never said I'm in the Nascent Soul stage."

Zhao Chuanjin stared at him in disbelief, shaking his head incessantly. "Are you saying you're already in the late Nascent Soul stage or beyond? No, impossible…"

Yan Ge smiled without a word, his gaze sweeping over the others. His eyes were curved and without malice, yet as his gaze passed over the cultivators, they couldn't help but shiver and have their hairs stand on end.

Zhao Chuanjin looked at Yan Ge resentfully, his gaze gradually growing dim, his breath fading completely.

Silence reigned for a moment on Baichang Mountain , with only the occasional wind rustling through the treetops, creating a faint whisper.

Yuan Luoheng looked at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen with shock and doubt. Had their cultivation really surpassed the Nascent Soul stage?

Seeing the fear and dread in their eyes, Huangfu Yuchen felt highly satisfied. He and Xiwo Ge should be able to enjoy some peace from now on.

He hugged Yan Ge's waist. "Xiao Ge, let's say what needs to be said and then leave. Boarding time is approaching."

Yan Ge nodded and addressed everyone, "For those who wish to enter the cultivation grounds, there will be a competition. Names will be ranked by cultivation level, from highest to lowest. Four people will be allowed in at a time for a month, taking turns. Once everyone has had a turn, a new round of competition will begin, and so on. You can inquire about the specific rules and requirements from Guo Jian and Guo Yi at the cultivation grounds. Farewell."

With that, the two soared into the distance. No need to say more about the others; after today's events, no one dared to underestimate them.

The remaining people stared blankly as the figures in the sky turned into small dots and disappeared. Everyone suddenly came back to their senses, and dashed madly toward the foot of the mountain.

Ruan Mingwei, Ji Chang, He Hong, and Zhang Jian exchanged a glance, shrugged, and descended the mountain. They needed to report today's events to their superiors.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen boarded the plane, heading to a coastal city and continuing their travels within the country.

Thinking about the cultivators fighting fiercely to gain entry to the advanced cultivation grounds, Yan Ge grinned cunningly. With the constraints of the Hidden Operations Department, the competition wouldn't be a matter of life and death, but it would certainly be intense, with minor injuries being unavoidable. Those who wanted to gain something would have to pay a price. Isn't that normal? There's no such thing as a free lunch in the world.

Yuanhai City was one of the most beautiful coastal cities in the country. Red tiles and green trees, blue sea and sky, the coastline was charming and magnificent. Lush paths wound through verdant trees, providing a delightful and unforgettable experience.

Though this scenery was slightly inferior to what Yan Ge could conjure within his space, the presence of visitors added vitality. Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen spent two days in Yuanhai City and a few days in Qizhaigou before intending to head to Nanhai. However, a phone call disrupted their plans.

Guo Jian spoke with urgency, “Mr. Yan Ge, please come back with Mr. Huangfu. A foreigner named Wei Wen insists on meeting you both. He said if you don’t appear within three days, he’ll level the cultivation grounds. We’re no match for them.”

A foreigner? Yan Ge immediately thought of the incident at Fengshan Mountain.

“Understood, we’ll return now.” Yan Ge turned to Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen stood up to pack their luggage. “I’ll make him regret disturbing our journey.”

Four hours later, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen stepped off the bus.

Guo Jian quickly approached them, likely having spotted them on the surveillance footage.

“What’s going on?” Huangfu Yuchen inquired.

Huangfu Yuchen spoke in his usual icy tone, void of emotion. Guo Jian wasn’t sure if it was his imagination, but now Huangfu Yuchen’s voice sounded extremely indifferent, carrying a kind of coldness. He recounted, “Early this morning, a foreigner named Wei Wen showed up with four subordinates. They directly sought out Guo Yi to meet the two bosses. Wei Wen said that if you don’t appear within three days, he’ll level the cultivation grounds. Guo Yi and I escorted them out, but Wei Wen’s skills are extraordinary. The two of us aren’t a match for him. The day after you two left, the competition among cultivators in the cultivation grounds began. Head Yuan Luoheng and his two disciples happened to be at the cultivation grounds. However, the of them aren’t a match for Him either. Cultivator Ruan and the others can’t do anything to him either.”

“Master Yuan and the others also made a move?” Yan Ge pursed his lips and smiled, “Are they all right?

Seeing that Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen didn’t look worried, Guo Jian felt relieved, “They were slightly injured. “Wei Wen seems to be only focused on dealing with the two bosses, and has no intention of making life difficult for them. “

“Where is he now? “ “Huangfu Yuchen asked in a cold voice. While talking, they had already entered the farm.

Guo Jian said: “In the dining area.”

Huangfu Yuchen: “Let him go to the back mountain.” “

Yan Ge took his luggage from him. “You guys go ahead. I’ll go check on Head Yuan Luoheng and the others.” Since the cultivation grounds were open to cultivators, Yuan Luoheng and the others were essentially just visitors to the farm. While their help was appreciated, they did have their own motivations when they intervened. However, their actions were real.

Guo Jian went to inform Wei Wen.

Huangfu Yuchen exited the farm and headed toward the back mountain.

Yan Ge returned home to drop off the luggage before seeking out Yuan Luoheng. On the way, he encountered Yu Mingqi and Ji Chang.

Ruan Mingwei hurried over, his expression serious. “Mr. Yan, you’re back.”

Yan Ge gestured for them to walk and talk. “What’s the background of that person? You should know, right?”

Ruan Mingwei nodded. “Wei Wen is the Archbishop of the Holy See. His strength is formidable, likely on par with the mid Nascent Soul stage of cultivation.”

“Nascent Soul stage?” Yan Ge was quite surprised. He hadn’t expected such a significant gap in strength between the Holy See and cultivators in China.

If the Holy See had ill intentions toward the Hauxia cultivation world, wouldn't China be defenseless?

Ruan Mingwei thought Yan Ge also found the opponent too strong and his heart sank. Although Wei Wen wasn't here to target the Hidden Operations Department or China, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had become their source of spiritual strength. If even they were powerless against Wei Wen, then China…

Ji Chang also misunderstood their reactions, and his eyes were filled with gloom. "The people from the Holy See are too arrogant. If not for… Mr. Yan, can you and Mr. Huangfu handle him together?"

Yan Ge was momentarily taken aback, then chuckled. "We'll know in a little while."

When he arrived at the courtyard Yuan Luoheng was, he found Yuan Luoheng preparing to leave with his two disciples, likely having received the news as well.

The three of them greeted, "Mr. Yan Ge."

Inside the farm, there were many ordinary people, so once inside, they no longer referred to each other as "Fellow Cultivator"; this was an unspoken rule among cultivators.

Yan Ge waved his hand at Yuan Luoheng. "Mr. Yuan, thank you for your assistance earlier."

Yuan Luoheng was very polite. "You're welcome."

Yan Ge scanned the three of them and nodded. "Fortunately, your injuries aren't severe. Otherwise, I'd feel too guilty. I have some elixirs with me. I'll have someone deliver them to you later."

Yuan Luoheng and his disciples quickly expressed their gratitude, fully trusting that Yan Ge's elixirs would be extraordinary.

The group then walked together toward the farm's main gate.

Guo Jian and five foreigners approached from a different path. Among them were Allen, Barry, Daisy, and Borg. The fifth foreigner was around forty years old, tall and sturdy, with deep-set eyes, a high-bridged nose, and only a gray vest on his upper body, exposing his arms. He walked unsteadily, looking somewhat intoxicated.

“He’s Wei Wen,” Ji Chang whispered.

Yan Ge and Wei Wen’s gazes locked.

Wei Wen shamelessly assessed Yan Ge from head to toe, lifting the corners of his mouth and revealing a sinister glint in his eyes. His gaze slowly shifted downward, landing on Yan Ge’s waist. He stuck out his tongue and licked his lips. Yan Ge smiled, then his eyes suddenly became sharp and intense. A fierce light surged within them, like rays of light transformed into solid form, shooting directly into Wei Wen’s eyes.

Wei Wen felt as if his eyes had been pierced by two invisible arrows. His heart shook, and his footsteps imperceptibly stuttered. He quickly activated his inner qi, gathering it within his mind to relieve the discomfort in his eyes. He retracted the smugness on his lips, no longer daring to underestimate Yan Ge. However, his gaze remained fixed on Yan Ge. Was this his opponent?

The two groups met at the entrance of the estate.

Wei Wen was about to speak, but Yan Ge walked past him without even glancing in his direction. Yan Ge’s right hand was casually in his pocket as he walked at a leisurely pace, appearing composed and graceful. He exited the farm and turned right.

Wei Wen’s eyebrows twitched slightly, but he followed without a word. After a few steps, he caught up and walked beside Yan Ge, his steps light and casual, seemingly implying a subtle challenge.

Yan Ge frowned and increased his pace, yet Wei Wen effortlessly caught up again.

Wei Wen looked at him with a triumphant expression.

Allen and Barry exchanged a glance, sharing a wordless smirk.

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Yuan Luoheng, Liu Yuandao, Gong Zhicheng, Ruan Mingwei, and Ji Chang all showed concern in their eyes. Judging from Yan Ge's condition, he seemed to be slightly inferior to Wei Wen in strength. However, none of them detected any signs of worry on Yan Ge's face.

Yan Ge's consistently composed demeanor left them uncertain, so they refrained from speculating and continued forward.

Guo Yi stepped out a bit slowly.

Behind Fengshan was Lingxiao Mountain, its northern side was already developed, while the southern side remained untouched. A valley lay in between Fengshan and Lingxiao Mountains. It was covered with thick bushes, bizarre rocks, and numerous poisonous insects and ants. No one had ever ventured into this area. Wild peach trees in the valley were in full bloom with pink blossoms that looked like clusters of pink clouds from a distance. A gust of wind blew, causing petals to flutter down like gentle rain, creating a scene of beauty.

Huangfu Yuchen stood nonchalantly on a peach tree branch. He casually glanced over and noticed the lecherous look that Wei Wen was directing at Yan Ge. With a flick of his right hand, he casually tossed something into the air.

Two thin yet fierce streams of killing intent shot towards Wei Wen's eyes. He tilted his head slightly in time to see two pink petals streaking past like bolts of lightning. It turned out to be two peach blossom petals! These petals traveled nearly a mile before slowly descending.

Wei Wen quickly turned to look at the cold, stern man standing on the branch and fully abandoned his contemptuous attitude. Given Huangfu Yuchen's strength earlier, if he hadn't evaded, those two petals could have pierced both his eyes like sharp blades.

A milky-white glow materialized beneath Wei Wen's feet, suspending him in mid-air. Silently, he landed on another peach tree not far from Huangfu Yuchen, exhibiting his skill by casually moving around the peach blossoms. His gaze remained just as arrogant as ever as he examined Huangfu Yuchen.

"I've heard that there are many handsome men in China, and it's true after seeing you today," Wei Wen's Chinese was extremely fluent. If not for his appearance, one would think that a native Chinese speaker was speaking. However, his voice carried an obscene tone that sent shivers down one's spine.

Huangfu Yuchen responded calmly, "I've also heard that there are many ugly people in Y Country who cause trouble, and today's meeting confirms it."

Wei Wen's eyes flickered slightly after Huangfu Yuchen's retort, his anger bubbling. Truthfully, Wei Wen wasn't ugly at all; he possessed a three-dimensional beauty and deep blue eyes that blinked with a gaze as alluring as an electric shock. He had always been proud of his appearance, and today was the first time someone had called him ugly.

Huangfu Yuchen successfully infuriated him, but he didn't immediately lose his temper. With a stern tone, he inquired, "Are you the one who injured my subordinates?"

"I've actually been regretting that I let them go. Your arrival is quite timely," Huangfu Yuchen chuckled.

"Just you?" Wei Wen snorted disdainfully. His gaze shifted toward Yan Ge and he laughed heartily, "In that case, let's have a fight. The two of you can attack together, and I promise to make you both submit."

Yan Ge waved his hand with a smile, “No need to trouble yourself. After you’re defeated, I’ll move their four bodies. One coffin will be enough after cremation.”

Ji Chang couldn’t help but chuckle.

Ruan Mingwei, Guo Jian, and Guo Yi also relaxed a bit. It seemed that both Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were quite confident.

Huangfu Yuchen raised his hand to set up a barrier, preventing the commotion from drawing the attention of others nearby.

Wei Wen’s hands darted into his trouser pockets, retrieving two identical curved blades. The tips were sharp like thorns, resembling inverted spikes. He held the two blades aloft and slightly crouched over, his cold gaze fixed on Huangfu Yuchen, resembling a poisonous snake fixated on its prey.

Yan Ge used his true qi as a blade, cutting off a section of green bamboo and gave it to Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen was as steady as ever, his gaze fixed on Wei Wen.

Both were searching for the opportune moment to attack, hoping to seize control of the battle’s rhythm.

Both remained motionless yet seemed to be in motion. The peach tree beneath their feet trembled slightly. Brilliant peach blossom petals detached from the branches silently, fluttering in an unseen wind and forming an unusual whirlwind.

Suddenly, Huangfu Yuchen’s right foot slipped.

‘An ppening!’ Wei Wen propelled himself off the tree, leaping like a cunning rabbit and lunging towards Huangfu Yuchen. His right-hand curved blade cleaved towards Huangfu Yuchen’s chest.

Huangfu Yuchen casually used the bamboo pole to defend.

Wei Wen was certain that since Huangfu Yuchen dared to use a bamboo pole as a sword, the pole's strength could ensure it remained intact. So, he knew that this strike wouldn't do much to Huangfu Yuchen. He flicked his right curved blade with the force on the bamboo pole, creating a momentary pause, while his left curved blade attacked, intercepting the bamboo pole. Simultaneously, his right-hand curved blade shot forward like a frog's tongue, attempting to snag Huangfu Yuchen's flesh. How does a frog catch insects? Its tongue rapidly shoots out from its mouth, capturing a mosquito flying by in just 0.3 seconds before swiftly retracting it back into its mouth.

The speed of the curved blade was just as swift!

Huangfu Yuchen's shoulders relaxed, his back arched, and his chest retracted. He suddenly distanced himself from the curved blades, while simultaneously withdrawing the bamboo pole from his right hand. With a swift movement, he swept it towards Wei Wen, and with a loud "smack", hit Wei Wen's shoulder.

Wei Wen was slightly taken aback. Huangfu Yuchen's reaction speed wasn't slower than his. Moreover, the strike held a substantial force. If his cultivation weren't profound, he would have been left coughing up blood.

"Swish", peach blossom petals fell from the trees like raindrops.

A "whoosh" sound came from the side as Huangfu Yuchen's bamboo pole swung again. Without needing to ponder, Wei Wen brought his two curved blades together, clamping down on Huangfu Yuchen like a pair of scissors and sharply cutting down.

Huangfu Yuchen leaped into the air, generating wind beneath his feet like a released arrow. Suddenly, he executed a backflip while in mid air, and the bamboo pole fiercely struck towards Wei Wen's head.

Wei Wen abruptly crouched down, performing a frog's leap to the side.

Huangfu Yuchen's force found no target, instead striking the peach tree with a resounding "bang." The tree split in two, and a brisk wind rapidly lifted countless petals, like water droplets sprayed upwards by a waterfall.

Wei Wen soared through the air, his two curved blades slashing in rapid succession, creating an extremely fast pace, making even the air pop and crackle as if it were exploding.

Ruan Mingwei and the rest had slightly lower cultivation levels, listening to these sounds made their hearts thud in response, and their scalps tingled.

Huangfu Yuchen expertly manipulated the bamboo stick, creating a strong, supple wind as he moved it flexibly. The bamboo stick twisted and met the blades at an oblique angle, which prevented it from snapping.

The impact was huge. Wei Wen felt as if he had been struck by a heavy hammer. The bamboo stick struck him repeatedly, numbing his wrists. Were it not for his profound cultivation, he would have lost his grip on the blades!

Wei Wen was not afraid of Huangfu Yuchen, but he realized just how difficult Huangfu Yuchen was to deal with. From the moment they began fighting until now, half an hour had passed, and he hadn’t gained any advantage. He had been struck by that wretched bamboo stick three or four times.

Suddenly, he stopped, and his momentum changed.

The nearby peach blossoms swayed vigorously, and several pink petals continuously detached from the branches. In less than half a minute, the beautiful peach blossom trees had turned bald, and the petals, like snowflakes swept by a storm, twisted rapidly in the wind, densely packed, almost blocking everyone’s vision.

While this was an extremely beautiful scene, Yuan Luoheng and the others didn’t appreciate it. The surging air of slaughter swept beneath the surface, causing them all to feel a chill down their spines and their palms to sweat.

A petal accidentally petal darted out from the center of the storm and brushed past Ruan Mingwei’s face. He felt a sharp pain, and when touched his face, his hand came away bloody.

He quickly pulled Ji Chang backwards.

However, Yan Ge remained composed and graceful in his stance, still keeping the nonchalant pose of one hand in his pocket. The storm of peach blossoms seemed to fear him as it diverted its course over him.

Wei Wen shouted loudly and tossed his left-hand curved blade. The blade spun at high speed like a meteor, hurtling towards Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen raised his “sword” defensively, twisting his waist and evading.

Wei Wen seemed to have anticipated his response. His other curved blade swung viciously, and the hook caught onto Huangfu Yuchen’s clothing, ripping a long gash.

After the single strike, Wei Wen retreated, leaping halfway into the air. He thought it was a pity. If he had attacked from a closer distance just now, he could have surely carved out a large piece of flesh from Huangfu Yuchen’s body. Who knew if Huangfu Yuchen could still maintain his calm façade at that point?

Huangfu Yuchen frowned, looking down at his clothes.

Wei Wen was overjoyed—this was his chance! Immediately, like a mountain crashing down, he swooped downward at a rapid pace. The tip of his curved blade aimed for the neck, so long as he could catch Huangfu Yuchen’s throat, he could slash his head off with a single motion!

In the last second that Wei Wen closed in, Huangfu Yuchen suddenly leapt up, his long legs rising, and he kicked forcefully, striking Wei Wen in the abdomen. Meanwhile, Wei Wen’s curved blade only brushed past the top of Huangfu Yuchen’s head, not even severing a single strand of hair. This was the “rabbit kicking the eagle”!

With a muffled groan, Wei Wen, who was still in mid-air, spat out a mouthful of blood. Before he could recover his composure, a black figure streaked like a meteor toward him, landing a heavy blow into his back. He fell to the ground, his head tilting back as he spat out another mouthful of dark blood. Yet, even in this state, he struggled to lift his head, his gaze

fixed on Huangfu Yuchen in disbelief, seemingly unable to accept that he had been defeated.

This single kick was powerful—his ribs must be broken. He tried several times but couldn’t manage to get up.

Huangfu Yuchen narrowed his eyes and glanced at him, elegantly retracting his bamboo pole.

Suddenly, Yan Ge walked a few steps to stand in front of Huangfu Yuchen. He used his hand to close up and press down the torn part of the clothing, shooting him a slightly displeased glance, as if reproaching him for exposing his skin in front of others.

Huangfu Yuchen was taken aback, then couldn’t help bursting into hearty laughter.

The joyous laughter made Ji Chang, Yuan Luoheng, and Guo Jian all stare in surprise, looking at Huangfu Yuchen with the same thought in their minds: ‘So, this person can laugh like this too.’

Yan Ge’s face turned a bit hot. He took Huangfu Yuchen’s hand and placed it on his waist. “Cover yourself!”

Huangfu Yuchen touched his earlobe. His laughter had stopped audibly, but the smile in his eyes hadn’t diminished one bit.

Wei Wen stealthily shifted his body, he was preparing to escape when Huangfu Yuchen suddenly swung the bamboo stick, releasing a burst of qi that shot straight into his heart.

“Wait!” Ji Chang tried to stop him in vain.

Huangfu Yuchen waved his hand to eliminate the other four members of Wei Wen’s group before casting a faint glance at Ji Chang.

Ji Chang muttered, “Their bishop died within our borders. I’m afraid…”

Yan Ge showed him a tranquil smile and asked in response, “You think they won’t cause us trouble if we spare them?”

Ji Chang and Wu Mingwei were momentarily speechless.

Yan Ge said meaningfully, “Even though we’re a nation of propriety, giving them courtesy once is enough. When it’s time to be firm, we should be firm. Waiting until others trample all over us is self-inflicted humiliation.”

“I leave this matter to you.” Huangfu Yuchen left these words for Ji Chang and Ruan Mingwei before walking away, resting his hand on Yan Ge’s shoulder. “Baby, cover the torn area for me.”

“Cover it yourself,” Yan Ge replied, looking up at the sky.

“My hand is sore from the fight.”

…

The two of them bantered as they walked away.

Yuan Luoheng, Liu Yuandao, Guo Jian, and the others exchanged glances. The excitement in their hearts hadn’t settled yet. Although this battle had nothing to do with them, they still gained valuable insights.

They soon departed.

Ji Chang and Wu Mingwei were left in despair, they had to deal with the five bodies.

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Ji Chang and Wu Mingwei walked to Wei Wen's body.

"You lift his legs, I'll lift his head, and we'll pile them together before burning them." Ji Chang said to Ruan Mingwei.

Ruan Mingwei bent down to lift Wei Wen's feet and accidentally saw that Wei Wen's right hand was tightly clutching a broken silver-gray cross about the size of a key.

His expression suddenly changed, and he picked up the cross. "Ji Chang, do you know what this is?"

Ji Chang's expression also changed when he saw the cross, and his eyes widened in shock. "Quickly, go and tell Mr. Yan and Mr. Huangfu! Leave this to me."

Ruan Mingwei dashed back to the farm. At this moment, it started to rain. The cold rain fell on his face, making his heart even colder.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had returned home. Huangfu Yuchen went to change clothes, while Yan Ge lay on the sofa contemplating Wei Wen's matter. Wei Wen's strength wasn't low; he likely held an important position within their organization. For someone like him to die in China, could the opposing side's leader really stay idle? Or perhaps, should he and Yuchen simply go to Country Y?

The doorbell rang urgently, and Yan Ge's spiritual sense picked up on Ruan Mingwei. He noticed his anxious expression and he used his spiritual sense to open the door.

“Mr. Yan!” Ruan Mingwei rushed into the living room and saw Huangfu Yuchen who had already changed into a different outfit coming from upstairs. Not bothering with propriety, he said directly, “Mr. Yan, Mr. Huangfu, before he died, Wei Wen sent a message to the Holy See. They might come knocking soon!”

“How do you know?” Huangfu Yuchen wasn’t surprised, and his tone was calm as he asked. He took down Yan Ge’s long legs that were propped up and sat beside him, then pulled them onto his lap.

Ruan Mingwei took out the cross and explained, “This is a cross used by the Holy See’s people to send messages, it uses holy light as the medium. They carry these crosses wherever they go and if a cross breaks, it’s sensed by the other side, indicating the cross’s owner has died. Wei Wen must have already sent the message back to their organization.”

Both Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen remained calm and still, which made Ruan Mingwei grow restless. If Wei Wen hadn’t sent out the message, as long as they dealt with the body, the Holy See’s people wouldn’t have evidence to suspect them. But now that Wei Wen had sent the message back, the other side knew he died in China, and they wouldn’t just let it go.

“Above an Archbishop is a Cardinal, who is much stronger in strength. What should we do?”

Ruan Mingwei was worried not only about Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen’s safety but also about the potential trouble that the death of Wei Wen might bring to China. He also blamed himself and Ji Chang for not considering this earlier. If they had warned Huangfu Yuchen earlier, things might have been different.

Little did he know that Huangfu Yuchen had concealed his strength during his fight with Wei Wen.

Where there are people, there’s bound to be conflict. Both Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had experienced both the court and the martial world, so they understood this truth well.

Huangfu Yuchen understood what Ruan Mingwei was worried about. “Xiao Ge and I have a plan. Report the situation here to Wang Zhiyuan.”

Ruan Mingwei was momentarily stunned, then quickly agreed, “Understood.”

…

The headquarters of the Shadow Operatives.

Wang Zhiyuan listened to Ruan Mingwei’s report and fell silent for a moment. Going back to the root, it was because of the Shadow Operatives that Wei Wen had come here. Killing Wei Wen wasn’t a mistake. Moreover, while Fengshan Farm wasn’t under the Shadow Operatives yet, they needed to consider it as their own and protect it. Otherwise, if any trouble arose, they’d have to deal with it themselves. Right now, he worried only about one thing: after Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen left, would they have the ability to keep Fengshan Farm secure? The most urgent task was to improve the relationship between them and Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. No matter what Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen did, as long as they didn’t threaten China, they would offer their help. Another priority was enhancing the Shadow Operatives’ strength.

The Cardinal would arrive soon. Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen abandoned their plans for outings and, like an ordinary couple, strolled around the city.

He Xin hurried out with his briefcase, he had to go into the city to negotiate business. Just then, he noticed the two with casual backpacks, leisurely walking towards the farm’s entrance. He couldn’t help but feel envious and jealous.

Seeing He Xin’s envious expression, Yan Ge couldn’t help but chuckle and waved at him. “Are you heading out? Take care.”

He Xin touched his forehead in exasperation, wondering how he was so easily fooled by these two back then? He raised his head, but they had already slipped away, quickly boarding a bus.

He shook his head and headed towards the parking lot.

In a castle in Country Y, a handsome young man in ted robes was elegantly seated at a luxurious dining table, enjoying breakfast. Chadwick stood behind him, respectful and not daring to look anywhere else.

At this moment, a servant rushed in. “Lord William, something’s not right! Archbishop Wei Wen’s cross has split!”

“What did you say?” William’s gentle face turned sharp, a fierce expression replacing his tranquility. He spoke slowly, his tone oozing out a frightening pressure. The utensils in his hands warped and twisted into a lump of silver, emitting a faint white light. The lump morphed into a silver sphere the size of a grape, rolling off the table and leaving a bowl-sized dent on the floor upon impact.

Chadwick’s feet went cold, his nerves tense, and his throat felt dry as he swallowed.

The servant couldn’t bear the overwhelming pressure, his legs trembling and his voice quivering, but he had to repeat the words, “The Archbishop Weyland’s cross… it split…” Splitting meant dead, but Archbishop Wei Wen was Lord William’s prized disciple. How could he dare to mention “death”? The possibility of incurring his master’s wrath made his knees weaken, and he knelt heavily on the ground, his face pale as ashes.

Sure enough, the immense pressure burst open like a bomb, and the servant flew out like a broken kite. He crashed into the wall, his brain splattering and staining the pure white wall a vivid crimson. Following that, the servant slumped to the ground like a pile of mud, motionless.

Chadwick hurriedly knelt down, kowtowing so hard that he bled from his forehead. If he didn’t, Archbishop William might direct his anger towards him. Yet, amidst his obedience, he harbored a malicious delight: ‘I warned you that those two from China were formidable, but you wouldn’t listen, accusing me of exaggeration. Well, look at it now. There’s no remedy for regret; Wei Wen is gone, and from now on, I’ll be your sole disciple!’

He thought this way, but didn’t dare show the slightest hint on his face; otherwise, William would shred him to pieces.

Indeed, William did intend to vent his anger on Chadwick. If it weren’t for him, how could he have sent Wei Wen to China? Just as he raised his hand, preparing to tear Chadwick apart, the blood on Chadwick’s head brought him back to his senses. He needed to find out more about those two people’s strength and background.

“Speak.” Just a simple word, but it brought Chadwick’s heart to his throat. He knew what William was asking, so he didn’t hesitate, “Those two are called Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. They emerged a few months ago…”

At this moment, William was seething with anger, and with no outlet, Chadwick recounted every detail as clearly as possible, and only then did her dare let out a silent sigh of relief.

He looked at the wooden stool beneath William, and found that it was embedded several inches deep into the ground.

“Very well, it’s been a long time since I’ve been to China.” William stood up slowly, and the chair beneath him collapsed, vanishing without a trace.

In China, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen exited the Oceanarium. They had just stepped onto the square when a thunderous roar echoed overhead.

They looked up to see bright sunlight, a brilliant blue sky, and white clouds drifting lazily. There was no sign of rain whatsoever.

Besides them, numerous tourists also looked up, their faces puzzled. The thunder had sounded right above them, yet there were no storm clouds overhead. This thunder was indeed odd.

As they continued observing, another explosion rang out. This time, the sound seemed closer.

“Huh? That’s strange.” A young man sipped from his girlfriend’s unfinished milk tea, looking up at the blue sky and white clouds with wonder.

“The weather’s going to change,” Yan Ge said with indifference, then turned to Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen nonchalantly responded with an “Mhm,” raising his camera and gesturing to Yan Ge, “Step back a bit.”

After taking a few more pictures, the two continued on their way.

Across the street, Du Rulan walked slowly along the sidewalk. Her face looked worn, her attire and makeup much simpler than before.

Yan Ge glanced at her for a moment, pausing for two seconds before moving his gaze away.

Huangfu Yuchen positioned himself behind Yan Ge, blocking the view of the people behind them. After confirming that no one was watching, he lowered his head and stole a quick kiss from Yan Ge’s lips before walking shoulder to shoulder, “The Yan family’s business is on the brink of collapse. Yan Jianqiang will probably declare bankruptcy.”

Yan Ge nodded, “I know. I’ll give them twenty thousand yuan every month from now on. It should be enough to get by. That’s all.” As for whether Yan Jianqiang would spend the money on his mistress or illegitimate child, whether Du Rulan would spend it on herself or her son, that had nothing to do with him.

“Baby,” Huangfu Yuchen patted his head, “Have you thought about bringing your parents over for a few days? They’d have a lot of fun.”

Yan Ge’s eyes lit up, his interest piqued, “Good idea. But we can’t let them find out I’m not their original Yan Ge.”

“That’s simple,” Huangfu Yuchen said, “China is huge, avoiding acquaintances is a piece of cake.”

Thinking about the expressions his father and mother would make upon encountering all sorts of peculiar things, Yan Ge couldn’t help but laugh,

his excitement barely containable, “Let’s bring them over after dealing with this trouble.”

Seeing him so happy, Huangfu Yuchen’s heart also lightened and filled with joy.

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Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen arrived at the valley behind the mountain, laying a soft blanket on the grass and placing some food on it. Needless to say, the valley was bathed in sunlight, with a gentle spring breeze. The delicate fragrance of wildflowers and the refreshing scent of grass wafted through the air, making it an excellent spot for a picnic. However, the peach trees were bare due to the previous battle, so theh didn't quite match the scenery.

After a moment's thought, Yan Ge condensed a small amount of spiritual energy in his hand and cautiously infused it into the peach trees.

Flower buds bloomed on the peach trees at a speed visible to the naked eye, and lush flowers blossomed. In the blink of an eye, the bald trees turned into large pink spheres.

Yan Ge stopped in time. Regular trees couldn't withstand excessive spiritual energy infusion; too much would cause them to burst and die.

This was his first attempt at something like this, and he hadn't expected the effect to be so good. He smiled at Huangfu Yuchen.

"Amazing," Huangfu Yuchen praised as he popped a strawberry into Yan Ge's mouth.

As Ji Chang, Ruan Mingwei, He Hong, and Zhang Jian approached, they witnessed the scene of Yan Ge's display of power, and they were amazed. They had special access routes to come here, and they were aware that someone would come knocking at their door soon.

The four of them approached together, respectfully greeting, "Mr. Yan, Mr. Huangfu."

“Hello,” Yan Ge had a certain fondness for these four. They were close to him and Yuchen due to vested interests, yet they maintained a good balance—neither overly obsequious nor overly ambitious. They were relatively easy to get along with.

Not long after, more people arrived from the farm, including Yuan Luoheng’s group and several cultivators they had met on Baichang Mountain. Being closer to the capital, they had hurried over upon hearing from Yuan Luoheng that foreign cultivators had come to trouble Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. These cultivators had relatively higher levels of cultivation, having performed well in the ranking competition among cultivators. It wouldn’t be long before they entered the farm for cultivation. Although they might not be of much help, their presence was a gesture.

Everyone politely greeted Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

Yan Ge smiled and replied to each one.

To their surprise, Huangfu Yuchen didn’t give them a cold shoulder and nodded in response.

The two of them leisurely enjoyed their fruits. After awhile, a series of thunderclaps sounded above them, going from muffled to resounding, from low to high. Within a few breaths, two figures streaked through the air like meteors, landing before Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

Only after they landed did the others notice the presence of another person behind them—Chadwick.

Chadwick looked at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, disdainfully raising his thumb, then giving them the thumbs-down gesture.

William and Grey saw the only two individuals who were sitting among the crowd and knew that they were Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

William’s gaze darkened. Suddenly, a massive pressure descended like a storm cloud, bearing down heavily.

While the pressure made Yuan Luoheng's group uncomfortable, as if they were carrying a thousand-pound weight on their heads, and invisible hands pressed them down, making their faces turn red and their inner energy churn uncontrollably, not one of them fled. Despite the grievances among them, they were all citizens of China at this moment, united against a common foe, determined not to lose face before outsiders.

Meanwhile, Grey stared at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, his eyes gleaming with admiration. These two were not only remarkable in temperament but also exceptional in appearance.

'Flexing your muscles?' Yan Ge thought. He casually extended his right hand with his palm up, and caught a drifting peach blossom. Swift currents of air then surged forth, as if a huge fan had fanned upwards.

The pressure above everyone's heads dissipated immediately, and they let out relieved breaths before calmly retreating.

A battle between experts was beyond their ability to intervene.

William's gloomy gaze shifted to focus on Yan Ge.

Yan Ge lazily leaned back on the blanket, his left hand propping him up, one leg stretched out while the other was casually bent. His right hand rested on his bent knee, looking relaxed and natural, and exuding an air of nonchalance and tranquility. His eyes even held a faint smile as he met William's gaze, devoid of any hostility or intent to fight, as if he was merely curious about the purpose of their visit.

'Hmm? He's not simple at all.' Grey, who was standing beside William, crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow. When William invited him to come to China, he had agreed without hesitation. But his motivation wasn't for Wei Wen or the so-called dignity of the Holy See; he was genuinely curious about Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. People who dared to provoke William were no simple.

He now felt that coming to China this time was the right decision.

“Was it you who killed Wei Wen?” William’s gaze was sharp.

Yan Ge raised an eyebrow. “Don’t you want to ask why?”

“Is that necessary?” William’s demeanor changed abruptly, the rustle of his robe sounding like cloth brushing against a blade. It was as if he was clad in clothes crafted from killing intent. “Since you dared to kill him, you should have anticipated today.”

Yan Ge chuckled. “Oh. Since you sent him to China to cause trouble, you should have anticipated that he would die.”

William no longer wasted words. “Grey, deal with the other one.”

After saying that, he raised his palm and struck towards Yan Ge.

Huangfu Yuchen raised his right palm in front of Yan Ge’s face, redirecting the force back. He calmly remarked, “I’m the one who killed Wei Wen.”

“Even better!” William’s killing intent surged forth as he lunged towards Huangfu Yuchen.

In a flash, Huangfu Yuchen’s figure shifted, moving as if he vanished for a moment. By the time everyone realized, he was already standing before William. His right fist was clenched and enveloped in true qi, striking towards William’s chest, while his left hand traced a large circle in the air, creating a transparent barrier that isolated the four of them from the others.

Yuan Luoheng’s group had previously witnessed the power of the barrier so they confidently moved closer to observe.

Other cultivators dared to stand closer as well.

Grey watched Yan Ge with amusement, beckoning him with his finger as he used rudimentary Chinese, “Come, let’s have some fun. I’m Grey, what should I call you?”

Before the words had fully left his mouth, he suddenly darted to the right. A sharp silver light nearly grazed his hand as it shot past.

He took a deep breath, realizing how close that was. If he hadn’t moved quickly, that light would have severed his fingers!

William glanced over but didn’t say anything. This was the result of Grey underestimating Yan Ge. In fact, it would have been better if that strike had hit Grey earlier, then Grey’s attacks would be even fiercer against Yan Ge. His purpose today was to ensure Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen’s deaths!

“Swish—” A surge of energy shot toward William’s head.

William spread his arms, swooping up like a hawk and evading the killing intent. In mid-air, he made a turn and charged downward, both fists acting like twin cannons, shooting out energy like bullets.

“Boom—Boom—Boom—” The ground was pounded into large craters. Soil and stones scattered like sparks in all directions. Even the boundary trembled from the torrential force.

Huangfu Yuchen made a few flowing movements, his true qi resembling a series of darting projectiles. They struck the “pellet-like” spheres of energy coming from the opposite side, and there were loud bangs as they exploded.

Suddenly, he leaped up like a carp jumping through the Dragon Gate, arching in mid-air. In the blink of an eye, he was before William, and an elusive yet intangible punch landed right in William’s chest.

William’s chest trembled. Around the center of impact, the ribs faintly ached. The bones weren’t broken, but William felt it—they had cracked. Instantly, his rage surged, and he lunged at Huangfu Yuchen, engaging in close combat.

Outside the boundary, spectators watched Huangfu Yuchen’s fist techniques create a whirlwind of energy, openings and closures, distancing and approaching, appearing and disappearing like shadows, sometimes solid, sometimes gentle. They were unpredictable, leaving them in awe, and they didn’t dare to blink.

William wasn’t any less capable. Initially, he thought he could take care of Huangfu Yuchen within fifty moves. Now, his anger grew with each attack. His strikes became more fierce and brutal; the sound of his long nails slicing through the air resembled someone forcefully tearing through sturdy fabric.

For a moment, the ground within the boundary quaked, and debris flew.

Turning attention back to Yan Ge and Grey.

Grey looked at Yan Ge’s harmless face and found himself hesitating to deliver a fatal blow. He considered toying with Yan Ge for a while, planning to let Yan Ge live until William killed Huangfu Yuchen, allowing William to personally kill Yan Ge.

However, he quickly realized he was mistaken—it wasn’t Yan Ge he was toying with, he was the one being toyed with.

Yan Ge’s movements were incredibly agile, striking and retreating with every move. He wasn’t launching lethal attacks against him; it was more like he was taunting him. To him, the air seemed to have an invisible staircase, and he maneuvered within it, climbing, descending, and leaping, dodging left and right.

At first, Grey remained composed, but Yan Ge’s teasing gradually provoked his impatience. Grey launched a fierce pursuit, but Yan Ge continued to evade, only swooping in for an attack whenever an opportunity arose. Unknowingly, Yan Ge gained control over the rhythm of the battle. Grey felt like prey, caught by a well-fed tiger, played with.

Outside the boundary, some onlookers began to see through the situation and couldn’t help but laugh.

Those who were bolder even laughed heartily. Although Yan Ge and Grey’s fight wasn’t as grand as the battle between Huangfu Yuchen and William, and didn’t involve spectacular clashes, it was satisfying to watch.

Unable to bear it any longer, Grey let out a roar and lunged at Yan Ge.

An overwhelming force surged towards Yan Ge's forehead in an instant. Yan Ge's lips curled into a smile. His body subtly shifted in mid-air, resembling a leaf detached from a tree, gliding along the wind's course. He was like a skiff on a swift river, smoothly evading Grey's assault.

The exquisite footwork caused Yuan Luoheng outside the barrier to exclaim involuntarily, "Impressive!"

Within this display was not only Yan Ge's profound cultivation but also his agile body and quick-wittedness in battle. Each of these aspects was worthy of contemplation and emulation.

Ruan Mingwei and his companions stared without blinking, afraid to miss a single detail. In fact, they should consider themselves fortunate. If it weren't for Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen intentionally suppressing their cultivation, they wouldn't be able to discern the battle within the barrier at all.

Yan Ge continued to tease Grey, he was like a little monkey in the woods, sneakily tapping someone's shoulder from behind before darting away.

Grey was thoroughly infuriated.

He made a flicking motion with his right hand, and a weapon appeared in his grasp—a tan-colored scepter. The top of the scepter featured a circular design, with three pitch-black holes at its center eerily resembling a skull. It looked quite menacing.

To make someone perish, one must first drive them to madness. Yan Ge had initially mocked and played with Grey, his main objective was to enrage Grey. Once Grey was furious, he would undoubtedly become fiercer and more ruthless. However, this would also expose more vulnerabilities. Under these circumstances, defeating Grey while concealing his true strength would be easier.

"Boom—" A white light burst forth from one of the scepter's holes, the laser-like beam aimed straight at Yan Ge.

Yan Ge jumped and evaded. The white light struck the ground, creating a deep well-like crater.

Before he could catch his breath, the second strike came.

As agile as a fox, Yan Ge dodged once again, casting a curious glance at the scepter in Grey's hand. He wondered if the energy within the scepter was limitless.

Thus, one strike and one dodge repeated over a dozen times. Grey never managed to hit Yan Ge. His brown eyes shifted in color, verging on black. This was due to the rapid circulation of energy.

"Very good!" Grey stopped, standing several meters away from Yan Ge. The corners of his mouth curled with a cold, unyielding grin, "Originally, I was reluctant to kill you, but now it seems sparing you would be a waste of your skills!"

With his hands behind his back, Yan Ge smiled playfully, "Come on."

"Clang—Clank—" Two bursts of white light shot out from the two "eye holes" of the scepter.

These two bursts were denser and larger than before. As they sped forward, the air friction emitted a hissing sound similar to crackling electricity.

Yan Ge knew these two strikes were stronger than the ones before and he didn't dare to be careless. He interlocked his palms, condensing a similar energy sphere from his true qi, meeting the attack head-on.

"Boom!" A deafening explosion resounded. The dazzling white light suddenly detonated, shooting out in all directions. The surging explosive force spread with an unstoppable momentum. Both Yan Ge and Grey were sent flying backward by the shockwave.

Even Huangfu Yuchen and William on the other side were affected. They continued to battle but also evaded toward a distance further away.

Fortunately, the barrier was sizable; otherwise, had they not managed to dodge in time, all four would have been injured.

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“Ahh!” Grey missed his strike and was completely infuriated. He swung the scepter and landed in front of Yan Ge.

From the three holes on the scepter shot out three white beams simultaneously. Not only that, these beams could freely change angles and directions, as if they were intelligent, continuously sweeping towards Yan Ge.

“Bang bang bang—” The ground was covered in densely packed black holes from the impact.

Yan Ge twisted his waist, leaped into the air, and suddenly appeared in front of Grey. With a flash of white light, he slashed at Grey from the shoulder to his right abdomen.

Grey let out a miserable cry, and fell to the ground. The scepter in his hand flew out and crashed heavily.

He looked down in disbelief. The gash on his chest was like a deep trench, exposing white bone. He looked towards Yan Ge, only to realize there was a sword in his hand, its silvery blade glistening. The sword was not ordinary; it had traces of blood, but the blood slowly dripped from the blade and left it pristine.

This young man actually had a weapon! A spiritual sword at that!

“You…” Grey’s words were cut short as he fell to the ground, lifeless, his eyes fixed on the sky in unwillingness.

“Ah!” Chadwick cried out in shock, his face turning pale. Cardinal Grey was dead!

In an instant, he felt a chill. He sensed everyone's eyes on him, filled with ill intentions on how to launch a surprise attack on him.

Seeing Grey's red robes become even redder because of fresh blood, Chadwick thought that if William also fell, he would face certain death. Overwhelmed with fear, he suddenly fainted.

Ruan Mingwei and Ji Chang exchanged glances, understanding each other's thoughts. They continued to observe the battle without a hint of emotion.

Zhang Jian and He Hong, on the other hand, burst into laughter without any hesitation.

William was engaged in a fierce battle with Huangfu Yuchen. When he noticed the absence of movement behind him and Grey's aura vanishing, a look of horror flashed in his eyes. Grey's strength was on par with his; could he have truly died so easily? Yan Ge's strength must be incredibly formidable if he could defeat Grey. If that's the case, Huangfu Yuchen's power probably wasn't far off!

Seeing that matters were settled on Yan Ge's side, Huangfu Yuchen smiled faintly and decided to conclude his battle with William.

William seemed to anticipate his intention. Crossing his hands in a circular motion, he gathered a large sphere of holy light that emitted a hissing sound, causing the ground to tremble as if in an eighth-level earthquake.

Hus face turned beet red and with a loud shout, he propelled the sphere of holy light towards Huangfu Yuchen.

Huangfu Yuchen also channeled his true qi to respond.

However, at that moment, William abruptly veered in the opposite direction. He hurled a cross, nearly a person's height, towards Yan Ge and simultaneously struck the barrier with a powerful blow. Then, he darted away from the barrier, took a few swift steps, and vanished from sight in the blink of an eye!

The cross shot forth with a powerful radiance, directly aimed at Yan Ge.

Yan Ge resisted the attack of the cross and understood William's tactics. As soon as Grey died, he knew he would be next. Faking a full-on assault on Huangfu Yuchen while attacking Yan Ge to prevent pursuit, he took the opportunity to flee.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen never expected this proud man would resort to fleeing.

Yet, considering it again, William knew his limits. Otherwise, he would undoubtedly face certain death.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen pursued immediately, but William seemed to use a secret technique or had other treasures on him. He vanished without a trace, leaving no sign behind.

Huangfu Yuchen furrowed his brows. William would appear again, and even though the enmity with Wei Wen wouldn't go unresolved, William's prideful personality meant he would surely seek revenge for today's humiliation.

"I was careless," Yan Ge sighed. William managed to escape from them who were at the Crossing Tribulation stage, and he felt frustrated.

Huangfu Yuchen looked at the cross that was now palm-sized. He picked it up from the ground and suggested, "This still carries some residual energy. Let's see if we can use it to locate him."

Yan Ge immediately agreed, "Good idea!"

"Ji Chang, we leave this to you," Huangfu Yuchen addressed Ji Chang. He and Yan Ge weren't concerned about Chadwick.

Jì Chang nodded swiftly, "Mr. Huangfu, rest assured, we'll be cautious."

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen ascended into the air, and flew into the distance.

As the two dots became smaller, the spectators left with a mixture of emotions.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen pursued the direction of Y Country, even entering its territory. However, they failed to sense any aura similar to that of the cross, though they unexpectedly discovered a few others emitting the same energy fluctuation as William.

Not wanting to escalate conflicts between cultivators from Y Country and China, they didn't provoke them and turned back.

Not long after returning home, a call from Wang Zhiyuan came. He mentioned he would visit at 3 PM.

Yan Ge agreed, and afterward, neither he nor Huangfu Yuchen left the house, waiting for Wang Zhiyuan's arrival.

The three of them settled in Yan Ge's sturdy.

"Mr. Wang's honored visit must be for something important," Yan Ge could vaguely guess his purpose.

After sitting on the sofa for barely five seconds, Wang Zhiyuan stood up and respectfully bowed to Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, "Both seniors are esteemed masters, nothing escapes your discerning eyes. Allow me to get straight to the point."

"Please."

Yan Ge motioned for him to sit and speak, his tone casual and demeanor composed, which somewhat relieved Wang Zhiyuan's nervousness.

Wang Zhiyuan began, "The battle between Cardinal William and Cardinal Grey was sparked by me, causing both seniors to be affected. However, William has always been arrogant, proud, and incapable of reason. With Wei Wen and Grey dying in seniors' hands, he won't stop seeking vengeance. I fear that if he's not dealt with, he'll cause trouble in China when the seniors leave. At that point, we'll have no protection and might

become Pawns. Our lives are trivial, but if friction between cultivators escalates into a conflict between countries, it will bring endless troubles."

Huangfu Yuchen's expression turned cold, "So, what do you propose?"

Wang Zhiyuan's heart trembled, but he pressed on, "I don't dare to ask seniors to eliminate William, but I hope seniors can find a way to intimidate the Holy See, so their followers won't act recklessly in the future. Both seniors are aware that the spiritual energy on Earth is becoming thinner, and cultivators generally have low cultivation levels. If not for this, I wouldn't dare make such a request."

"What if we refuse?" Huangfu Yuchen's lips curved into a cold smile. Intimidation was a long-term strategy, and the target was an organization. However, eliminating a single person was achievable in the short term and had a smaller scope. Judging from his tone, intimidating the Holy See seemed easier to him than eliminating William? Toad yawning — what an arrogant attitude!

Wang Zhiyuan sighed deeply, and rose from his seat, "Then I'm afraid the state machine…" He didn't finish his sentence.

*The state machine is some kind of weapon. He's threatening Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

Yan Ge's smile faded. He understood Wang Zhiyuan's perspective but didn't necessarily agree. Wang Zhiyuan had implicated them but now he was trying to coerce them to do the clean up. It seemed his perception stemmed from their generosity and tolerance, making him think they were easy to manipulate. William's status was higher than Wei Wen's, and mishandling this situation would indeed lead to a series of troubles. While he and Yuchen had intended to eliminate all potential future troubles, willingly acting and being coerced into it were entirely different concepts.

Wang Zhiyuan must have already thought through various scenarios and responses before coming. He suddenly knelt on the ground, forced a drop of blood from his body and enveloped it with true qi before suspending it in the air. He offered it to Yan Ge. “This is my heart’s blood. After Senior Yan refines it, you can control my life and death. I only ask that the two seniors to consider my unwavering dedication to the country and grant my request.”

Huangfu Yuchen frowned, glancing at Yan Ge. He wasn’t from Earth and didn’t hold any sentiment toward it. This matter was for Xiao Ge to decide. Wang Zhiyuan must have realized that Xiao Ge cared more which was why he knelt before him. It had been a while since anyone dared to scheme against them like this.

A chilling aura emanated from Huangfu Yuchen.

Although Wang Zhiyuan trembled under the oppression, he maintained his posture with trembling hands.

Yan Ge suddenly felt his goodwill dissipating. He leaned on the sofa and spoke with indifference, “We’ll agree to this, but on the condition that before we leave, neither the members of the Shadow Operations Group nor the leaders behind it have any authority over the farm.” As for the pressures Wang Zhiyuan would face due to this decision, it had nothing to do with him.

Wang Zhiyuan opened his mouth but couldn’t utter a word. After a while, he managed to say, “Okay.”

He still extended the blood toward Yan Ge.

Yan Ge didn’t accept it. He pulled Huangfu Yuchen upstairs, not sparing another glance at Wang Zhiyuan. “We’re going to rest now. You’re free to go.”

With a deep sigh, Wang Zhiyuan rose and left.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen arrived in the second-floor room.

Worried that Yan Ge might dwell on the matter, Huangfu Yuchen said, “Baby, this is for the best. Let’s turn a blind eye to them from now on. If you’re still unsatisfied, we can leave right now. With our cultivation level, what can the state machine do to us?”

“We can leave, but what if the Shadow Operations Group uses our friends as leverage?” Yan Ge asked.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded in understanding, “That’s a valid point. If Wang Zhiyuan could orchestrate today’s event, he might resort to using hostages against us.”

Yan Ge chuckled at his response.

Huangfu Yuchen pushed him back and guided him to lie down before embracing him. “However, we still don’t know the true strength of the Holy See. How should we intimidate them.”

“I actually have an idea about that,” Yan Ge mumbled against his shoulder, seeking his opinion. “We can undergo the Tribulation on Earth, right within the Holy See’s territory. I’ve asked Ji Chang before. Due to the gradual thinning of spiritual energy, no cultivator has reached the Crossing Tribulation stage in nearly eight hundred years. Imagine how the Holy See’s members would react to witnessing us go through the Tribulation. What do you think?”

“Hmm?” Huangfu Yuchen fell silent for a moment. “It’s a good idea, but the spiritual energy on Earth is sparse. Undergoing the Tribulation here might be more challenging.”

Yan Ge responded, “We’ll have to find a way to gather more spiritual stones and set up an array when the time comes.”

Thinking of Yan Ge’s system store, Huangfu Yuchen felt reassured. “Alright then.”

He pinched Yan Ge’s face and continued, “Our current priority is still to find William. Once we’ve dealt with him, we can then have our parents

come over.”

Yan Ge caught his words and corrected him, “Father-in-law and mother-in-law!”

Huangfu Yuchen adapted smoothly, “Alright, father-in-law and mother-in-law.” Since his beloved had an accommodating expression, he had to let him have a little victory in words. And so, Yan Ge playfully bit his neck.

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled softly, pressing him into his embrace and then onto the bed…

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He Xin carried his briefcase and left the farm after work, and noticed some oddly imposing people heading towards Division Two. He felt puzzled. It wasn't the first time he had seen these people coming in and out of the farm. It had been a few months since he started managing the farm, yet he knew nothing about Division Two. It seemed like an entity entirely independent of the farm. He had thought about asking Yan Ge, but since Yan Ge hadn't told him, there was a reason he wasn't being told. Asking would likely be in vain. Still, his curiosity persisted. He also had some curiosity about Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen's current identities and had a feeling there was a secret beneath it all.

He shook his head, deciding not to think about it any further, and went to the parking lot, retrieved his car, and drove home.

On the way, he felt something heavy hit his car. He stopped the car and looked down. He suddenly feeling dizzy, then lost consciousness and plunged into darkness…

~

In the past few days, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen hadn't been busy. After searching for William for a few days to no avail, they gave up searching and decided to live their lives normally, waiting for William to approach them.

Just as they were about to have dinner, Yan Ge's phone rang. It was an unfamiliar number.

Thinking it might be a business call, Yan Ge handed the phone to Huangfu Yuchen. He took a few pieces of freshly cooked braised pork from the pot and began eating.

“Who’s this?”

“This is Huangfu Yuchen, right?”

William!

Yan Ge recognized his voice and a sense of unease struck him.

“Your good friends, Xu Kai and He Xin are in my hands,” William said with a smile.

“What do you want?” Yan Ge’s eyes emitted a dangerous glint. Kidnappings were hard to defend against. Even if William kidnapped some ordinary people to threaten them, they couldn’t refuse. The only way was to eliminate him and prevent future threats!

William: “It’s simple. I want you to retrieve something for me. Of course, you have the right to refuse. However, there will be consequences if you do refuse, and you understand that.”

Yan Ge furrowed his brows. If Xu Kai and He Xin had something that could be accurately sensed by their spiritual awareness, they could find them no matter where William hid them. But the problem was, Xu Kai and He Xin were just ordinary people.

This time, they had no choice but to agree to his terms.

Huangfu Yuchen saw that it was a domestic phone number and expanded his spiritual sense to cover the entire country. He searched for William’s presence, but found nothing. He shook his head at Yan Ge.

Yan Ge spoke into the phone, “Go ahead.”

William’s voice came through with amusement, “You’re aware of the Bermuda Triangle, right?”

Yan Ge responded coolly, “You’d better get to the point.”

William chuckled again and fell silent.

Yan Ge remained silent too. He knew William would continue, considering he wanted them to go to the Bermuda Triangle. He would reveal it eventually.

William seemed to find his lack of response boring, but he continued, “I want you to retrieve a pure black cross that is half as tall as a human and has a powerful sacred energy. It was thrown into the Bermuda Triangle by the Pope over two hundred years ago. I want you to find the cross, and when you do, call this number. You have ten days at most.”

Yan Ge asked calmly, “Is that all?”

“Yes,” William replied.

Yan Ge hung up the phone without hesitation.

Huangfu Yuchen was puzzled, “Is the Bermuda Triangle dangerous?” Otherwise, why would William ask them to go there? William might want them to die in that dangerous place, or he might genuinely want them to find the cross. It didn’t matter. But regardless of whether William’s intentions, they had to make the trip.

While explaining to him, Yan Ge opened his notebook, “You know, Earth is a huge spherical body. Latitude 30° North is a special line on Earth, with many mysterious areas and symbols, including the Bermuda Triangle, Egyptian pyramids, the Sphinx, Mount Everest, the Dead Sea… see.”

They both leaned over the notebook to examine the information about the Bermuda Triangle.

Huangfu Yuchen grew curious, “Why are all these places along the same latitude? It’s quite peculiar.”

Yan Ge wasn’t sure, “There are many scientific hypotheses, but none seem reliable. Regardless, the Bermuda Triangle is indeed a dangerous area.”

After reading a few pieces of information about the Bermuda Triangle, Huangfu Yuchen was eager to explore. With their abilities to fly and

manipulate the elements, he felt confident about venturing into the Bermuda Triangle.

“We only have ten days. Let’s depart as soon as possible.”

Yan Ge nodded and first made a call to Xu Kai and He Xin’s families, explaining that they were joining a mysterious travel group and wouldn’t be able to contact the outside world. The call was made secretly, and they would return in a few days. Both families trusted Yan Ge’s words, given their close relationship with , and wished them a safe journey.

Since most of their essentials were stored in their storage rings and system space, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen didn’t need to pack much. They briefly informed Guo Jian and Guo Yi, bought some equipment they might need, and then flew towards the Bermuda Triangle.

Looking at the shoreline, the Bermuda Triangle’s waters were eerily calm. The blue sky was reflected on the water’s surface, and the sea appeared as deep blue as the sky above, creating a mesmerizing sight that resembled a crystal palace.

By the seaside, members of the beach rescue team, dressed in uniform attire, gathered in groups of two or three, leisurely sipping beer. They awaited distress signals from shipwrecks. Once a ship hot a rock, numerous vessels would quickly sail toward the incident site, rescue survivors and receive generous rewards in return. This industry brought them immense wealth. It wasn’t that they were callous; they had simply become numb from witnessing so much. This was a distinctive industry unique to the Bermuda Triangle.

Because they had already researched thoroughly on the internet, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen didn’t linger to savor the sea view. They became invisible and flew straight to the location where anomalies often occurred.

Yan Ge paused his steps, his face showing a mix of surprise and intrigue, “Yuchen, did you notice?”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded and pulled him down towards the surface. As they descended, they stopped just tens of meters above the water surface. Gazing at the water, Huangfu Yuchen said, “There’s a strong spiritual energy here.”

Yan Ge had a sudden thought, “Yuchen, do you think it’s possible that the frequent anomalies at 30° North are caused by spiritual energy? Or perhaps, it’s due to formations?”

Huangfu Yuchen wasn’t sure, “Your theory might hold some merit. Shall we investigate further?”

“Mhm,” Yan Ge nodded.

The two landed on the water’s surface and slowly descended, submerging into the water. Huangfu Yuchen took out two large stones they had prepared in advance. Each held one, hastening their descent and conserving their true qi.

Due to their advanced cultivation, the seawater didn’t affect their vision. Fish of various sizes swam around, seemingly detecting the danger posed by the two and avoiding them from a distance.

It was still morning, and sunlight projected onto the water, tinting the deep blue sea with a touch of gold. The water gently rippled, resembling a gem. It was truly a delightful sight.

Huangfu Yuchen sighed inwardly, thinking that after rescuing Xu Kai and He Xin, he would return with Xiao Ge. He knew Xiao Ge was worried about Xu Kai and He Xin so it wasn’t the right time to discuss this now, but he stored this thought in his heart.

The two calmly breathed as they sank, until their feet touched the ocean floor. They had chosen a spot deep underwater and had been descending for nearly forty minutes from the time they submerged.

“A cross that’s half as tall as a human isn’t small, but compared to the vast ocean, it’s like finding a needle in a haystack. How are we going to find it?” Yan Ge felt helpless.

Huangfu Yuchen had thought about this, “Don’t worry, my love. Let’s start by searching. If we can’t find it, we’ll create a fake one that possesses earth-shattering power. I refuse to believe that William won’t be swayed by that.”

His calm demeanor and confident words eased Yan Ge’s heart. He leaned in and kissed Huangfu Yuchen’s lips with a smile, “You’re right. I refuse to believe that two Crossing Tribulation cultivators like us can’t deal with him. He kidnapped our friends, right? If all else fails, we can kidnap his relatives and friends too. Let’s see who will win!”

Huangfu Yuchen smirked, “Exactly.”

Having made up their minds, they didn’t hesitate any longer. They focused on the area where the spiritual energy was stronger and moved forward.

As they distanced themselves from the surface and ventured deeper, the water grew darker.

Yan Ge checked the depth gauge they brought and exclaimed in surprise, “We’ve already descended over 8,000 meters.”

Huangfu Yuchen looked at the steep slope ahead, “It seems we’ll have to continue going deeper.”

For about half an hour, they moved along the steep slope. Yan Ge checked the depth gauge again and was suddenly pulled by Huangfu Yuchen.

Looking up, Yan Ge saw a snake-like creature flash past him like lightning, almost brushing his shoulder. The creature’s girth was taller than him, its length reaching over fifty meters. It resembled a snake but had additional centipede-like legs, its open mouth as dark as a hole, utterly terrifying.

“What is this…?” Yan Ge gazed at Huangfu Yuchen in astonishment. “I didn’t sense its aura.”

The creature suddenly leapt towards Huangfu Yuchen. In that instant, Huangfu Yuchen signaled to Yan Ge with a nod, and then he brandished his spiritual sword, attacking the creature.

The creature’s body was extremely agile, even in the depths of the sea. It caused the seawater to churn violently, creating huge ripples. This demonstrated how powerful the creature’s strength was!

Yan Ge quickly focused the energy in his dantian to stabilize himself.

Huangfu Yuchen held up the spiritual sword and thrust it toward the creature’s neck.

The creature was remarkably nimble in the water, with no hindrance from the seawater. It lifted its head to evade the attack, simultaneously swinging its tail around to strike at Huangfu Yuchen.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were unaware that at this moment, the sea’s surface was turbulent like a tsunami. Violent winds rose from the sea, attacking the sky. Dark clouds rapidly gathered, as if a severe storm was imminent!

And the instigator of this impending tempest was none other than the sea creature beneath!

On a nearby ship, a young crew member gazed into the distance with puzzlement, “This storm has come in a rather peculiar manner.”

Another slightly older crew member chuckled dismissively, “Such storms are quite normal in this area. There’s nothing odd about it. Let’s get inside; the storm is about to arrive.”

The young crew member glanced at the distance, the confusion on his face not fading. He still found the onset of the storm quite strange. But unable to make sense of it, he shook his head and also entered the cabin.

Beneath the sea, Huangfu Yuchen continued to battle the creature.

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The creature's massive body was surprisingly agile. It pounced ferociously at Huangfu Yuchen, opening its large mouth to reveal gleaming sharp teeth. When its attack missed, the creature's body rolled forward and arched like an upright hoop or a giant stone roller. It flipped over in an instant, its tail swung down towards Huangfu Yuchen's head.

Huangfu Yuchen wielded his sword to strike back, managing to hit the creature's body for the first time, precisely at its tail. Despite the creature's tough-looking skin, his spiritual sword was able to slice through it with ease. The creature's blood gushed out, tinting the nearby seawater red.

Yan Ge promptly cast a barrier to prevent the scent of blood from attracting sharks and other predators.

The creature suddenly turned its head, fixing its gaze on the sword in Huangfu Yuchen's hand. In its grey-white eyes had a hint of anger and… contemplation.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen exchanged a surprised glance. If they were not mistaken, it seemed that this creature could think?

The creature launched another attack, deliberately evading Huangfu Yuchen's sword. This confirmed Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge's speculation. Perhaps the creature had developed intelligence from staying in places rich in spiritual energy.

For animals to gain intelligence was exceedingly rare. But with its ferocious aura, Huangfu Yuchen had no intention of showing mercy as he confronted it head-on.

The creature’s body twisted like a corkscrew, evading Huangfu Yuchen’s strike. However, Huangfu Yuchen’s movements were astonishingly swift, his figure disappeared in the blink of an eye and reappeared behind the creature. With a precise thrust, his spiritual sword descended straight down.

The creature roared in anger, its eyes growing as large as footballs. Its body writhed violently, causing waves and turmoil in the water. It attempted to shake off Huangfu Yuchen, yet Huangfu Yuchen’s feet seemed to stick to the creature’s body like glue. With both hands gripping his spiritual sword, he thrust it deeper.

The creature’s tail rose again, its tip resembling a steel cone, aimed at Huangfu Yuchen’s back.

Huangfu Yuchen sensed danger from behind, and knew that the creature’s tail was striking. He gracefully shifted to the right, but he heard Yan Ge’s urgent shout, “Watch out!”

The voice carried both alarm and astonishment. Huangfu Yuchen realized something was amiss but didn’t turn his head. Instead, he pulled his spiritual sword diagonally upward, inflicting more damage to the creature, and simultaneously leaped into the air.

Only then did he glance back and his eyebrows slightly raised in surprise. The creature’s tail had unfurled like a bud, revealing another identical head!

There were now two wounds on the creature’s body and it was enraged beyond measure. Its eyes were bloodshot, and it charged at Huangfu Yuchen in a fit of fury, emanating a strong stench of blood. With two heads, it acted as though there were two separate creatures, working in harmony without interfering with each other, making its attacks even more fierce.

Huangfu Yuchen felt greater pressure than before, evading and attacking simultaneously. His brows furrowed, this approach wasn’t sustainable. He looked at the two massive heads and an idea formed in his mind. He leaped toward the middle of the creature’s body and said, “Baby, your spiritual sword.”

Yan Ge b but quickly grasped his intention and tossed his spiritual sword. Although the sword was bonded to him, Huangfu Yuchen could wield it as well. Perhaps due to their prolonged interactions, their auras had mingled together. Of course, they couldn't communicate with each other's swords, but they could still use them as ordinary weapons.

A trace of wariness flickered in the creature's eyes. Nevertheless, it continued to battle fiercely, its two heads not ceasing their relentless assault on Huangfu Yuchen.

With a sword in each hand, Huangfu Yuchen attacked the creature's two heads. He remained positioned in the middle of the creature's body, forcing it to twist into a "U" shape every time it attacked him.

As the battle continued, Huangfu Yuchen's attacks grew weaker, and the creature's satisfaction was evident. Seizing the opportunity, the creature attacked fiercely. Both heads charged toward Huangfu Yuchen in unison, aiming to trap him.

A cunning smile tugged at Huangfu Yuchen's lips. Just as the two heads were about to strike him, he swiftly vanished. The creature's heads collided violently, causing huge ripples in the sea. With a composed demeanor, Huangfu Yuchen raised his sword and effortlessly cleaved the creature into two halves.

The creature's resilience was formidable. It writhed madly for a several minutes before finally stopping, dead.

Yan Ge drifted over and patted the creature's head sympathetically, "It's not scary to die at the hands of an enemy, but it's frightening to die by your own actions." He glanced at Huangfu Yuchen with a playful smile. "Humans are quite cunning."

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled and returned the spiritual sword to him. "That's why we're a perfectly matched pair."

Yan Ge looked puzzled. How did that have any connection to what he had just said?

Huangfu Yuchen patted his head and held his hand. “I’m a human, and you’re a human, so I’m cunning, and you’re cunning too. Let’s go.”

After taking a few steps, Yan Ge stopped abruptly. “Wait.”

“What’s wrong?” Huangfu Yuchen looked at him curiously as he walked back to the creature’s corpse.

Yan Ge stowed the creature’s body into the system’s store for sale. “This thing is quite rare. Maybe it’s worth something.”

Huangfu Yuchen grinned, also patting the creature’s severed head. “Poor thing.”

Yan Ge stared at him. “Aren’t I doing this to support our family?”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded quickly. “You’re doing the right thing, my love. If we encounter such a creature again, I’ll go kill it.”

The two of them bantered and continued on, but didn’t meet any more strange creatures.

Yan Ge felt bored and opened the system store to check if the creature had sold. He didn’t have high hopes, but when he saw the shelf was empty and a notification indicated the creature’s body had sold for 10,000 high-grade spirit stones, he couldn’t help but raise his chin in satisfaction.

“It was actually bought?” Huangfu Yuchen knew him well, and from his expression, he guessed what had happened and was somewhat surprised.

Yan Ge nodded, “10,000 high-grade spirit stones.”

Both of them were quite pleased. They hadn’t expected to make a small fortune on this trip.

However, thinking that He Xin and Xu Kai were still in William’s hands, they didn’t dare to linger and continued forward.

“The seawater is surging.” Yan Ge watched as his clothes floated in a clockwise direction and patted Huangfu Yuchen’s waist.

Huangfu Yuchen nodded, gazing ahead. “Judging from this situation, it seems like we’re getting close to a vortex.”

At the same time, both of them sensed that the spiritual energy had become denser. It was as if they were gradually approaching the source of the spiritual energy.

After moving forward for about a hundred meters, they saw a vortex ahead of them. The water vortex spun incredibly fast, and the seawater in that area was much darker than elsewhere. Fish, shrimp, and other creatures passing by couldn’t withstand the force of the vortex. They were swept in and disappeared in an instant. Due to the rapid speed, it looked as though they were dissolved by the rapidly spinning dark seawater. The lucky fish that managed to escape struggled to swim away from the dangerous zone.

Yan Ge looked down the vortex and saw a massive black hole with a diameter of about two hundred meters at the seabed. It looked like the gaping maw of a giant beast, seemingly bottomless. This was where the seawater entered.

He exchanged a glance with Huangfu Yuchen. The source of the spiritual energy was right below them; there was no reason not to take a look.

“Yuchen, this vortex is enormous. If we continue like this, we might be separated by the seawater.”

Huangfu Yuchen furrowed his brows. While it was feasible for them to cling to each other, the force of the seawater was incredibly strong. The direction of the vortex’s rotation had minor variations. If the seawater forcefully pulled them in different directions, they were likely to get injured even if they held onto each other.

“Use a double-layer barrier,” Huangfu Yuchen suggested.

“Let’s give it a try.” Yan Ge first generated a barrier with his true qi that could accommodate both of them. He then added another layer outside of it before pushing it into the vortex. The barrier resembled a transparent, sturdy sphere sinking deeper along with the vortex’s pull. Yan Ge sensed that the barrier remained intact and nodded to Huangfu Yuchen.

They held hands and formed a double-layer barrier around themselves before jumping into the vortex. They immediately felt a powerful force tossing them around.

Inside the vortex, it was pitch-black, and not a trace of light could be seen. Yan Ge took out his night pearl.

Huangfu Yuchen looked at his wristwatch. After more than twenty minutes, the vortex’s speed gradually decreased, and the darkness started to dissipate.

Suddenly, a forceful thrust struck the barrier and the two of them were thrown out of the vortex, landing on solid ground.

Before they could assess their surroundings, the whole space lit up and at the same time, a fierce killing intent surged toward them.

Looking up, they saw a burly man in gray armor holding a sharp sword. His eyes were as cold as ice, but strangely, his body seemed to twist and sway with the flow of the seawater, as if his flesh was soft.

Yan Ge carefully observed and realized that the man wasn’t a real person; he was merely a projection. Despite that, the killing intent emanating from him made them cautious and not dare to act recklessly.

Huangfu Yuchen looked at the man with concern, “My love, it seems we’ve inadvertently triggered a formation here.”

Before Yan Ge could speak, the man swung his sword toward them. With just one step, he appeared right in front of them.

“Yuchen, I’ve got this!” Yan Ge unsheathed his sword to block the attack. Feeling the impact from the man’s strike, Yan Ge’s face showed astonishment, “Sure enough, although he’s just a projection, his attacks are real!”

“Be careful,” Huangfu Yuchen stepped aside warily, keeping an eye on Yan Ge and the man while surveying their surroundings.

The space was quite peculiar. Despite being in the deep sea, it was as bright as day. This allowed them to clearly see that they seemed to be inside a cave. Fish bones were scattered on the ground, along with human skeletons. Not far away, there were even four or five sunken ships half-buried in the soil, their hulls damaged and worn. Due to the passage of time, they were heavily corroded, making it impossible to discern any inscriptions on them.

Huangfu Yuchen’s spiritual sense extended to only a hundred meters before being cut off by a barrier.

The man in battle armor displayed exquisite swordsmanship. The seawater posed no hindrance to him as he thrust his sword. The sword light shot like lightning toward Yan Ge.

Yan Ge quickly dodged, and the sword energy landed on a decaying log behind him, slicing the log in two as if cutting through tofu.

Yan Ge smiled, a fierce battle intent gleaming in his eyes. His aura suddenly converged, but the killing intent on his sword grew heavier. The spiritual sword seemed to trace a complex character in the seawater and the sword energy surged and roiled like a torrent, rushing toward the man in battle armor with the force of a flooding river.

The man’s body froze for an instant. With both hands lifting the sword, he forcefully split the rushing torrent into two, diverting it to both sides.

Yan Ge had anticipated this move. He leaped into the air and glided through the passage opened by the man, and his spiritual sword descended like lightning from above the man’s head.

However, the man also knew how to teleport. He suddenly vanished without a trace, and his aura appeared behind Yan Ge.

Yan Ge swiftly turned around, using his spiritual sword to block the opponent’s weapon.

The powerful forces clashed, causing both individuals to tremble slightly.

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The mysterious man shook the object in his hand and quickly executed an incantation with his left hand.

The seawater behind Yan Ge suddenly stirred, propelling him swiftly toward the man. At the same time, the sword in the man's hand came down with force.

Yan Ge was greatly alarmed. In less than two breaths, he was already in front of the man. He tried to lift his spiritual sword, but his wrist felt heavy, as if bound by a massive stone.

Huangfu Yuchen noticed something amiss and was extremely shocked. He quickly moved over and was about to intervene but four creatures suddenly emerged from the distant vortex, the same as the snake-like creature they had encountered before. They ignored Yan Ge, Huangfu Yuchen, and the man, and headed straight for the barrier that had blocked Huangfu Yuchen's spiritual sense.

The man Immediately released his hold on Yan Ge and intercepted the four creatures, engaging in combat with them.

Huangfu Yuchen held back Yan Ge and carefully examined him. "Are you okay?"

Yan Ge shook his head and curiously looked over there. "It seems those four creatures want to pass through the barrier, and that projection is protecting the barrier. Could it be that the strange occurrences around the Bermuda Island are caused by their battles?"

Huangfu Yuchen nodded in agreement. "Most likely."

He looked at the man in the distance, who was on par with or possibly even stronger than Yan Ge, but was struggling against the four creatures. Another creature swam from behind and swiftly headed towards the barrier, but the man intercepted it as well.

“Yuchen, do you think we can communicate with that person and ask him to let us in to find the cross?” Yan Ge asked, though without much hope.

Huangfu Yuchen shook his head. “He’s probably just the residual consciousness left behind by a powerful being. Besides the instinct to protect the barrier, he lacks self-awareness. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have attacked as soon as he saw us.”

Yan Ge responded, “Regardless, we have to go in and take a look. Finding the cross is our top priority.”

“Now is the best time.” The two said in unison, looking at the man surrounded by creatures.

With that, they instantly teleported over and, without hesitation, attacked the barrier together.

“Boom—”

The man swiftly lunged toward them.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen exchanged a glance. It truly was about protecting the barrier!

Yan Ge evaded and spoke cautiously, “Senior, we only want to enter to find a cross. We mean no harm. Once we find the cross, we’ll leave immediately.”

The man remained silent, using his sword to fend off an ambush from a creature behind him, then attacked Yan Ge again.

Huangfu Yuchen took the opportunity to strike the barrier once more.

The barrier trembled slightly but showed signs of cracking.

Yan Ge also noticed and quickly said, “Yuchen, keep it up. I’ll hold him off!”

“Be careful!” Huangfu Yuchen noticed that the creatures were also attacking the man. Feeling slightly relieved, he channeled his true qi and launched a full-scale attack.

With a loud “bang”, Huangfu Yuchen blasted a large hole in the barrier, but it quickly started shrinking!

Huangfu Yuchen was amazed. Normally, when a barrier was breached, it would lose its effect. But this barrier was exceptionally peculiar, making him even more curious about what existed within.

He quickly called out to Yan Ge, “Baby!”

Yan Ge lured the creatures that were about to rush towards the entrance to the man, and they seized the chance to teleport away, entering the hole together with Huangfu Yuchen. Just in time, they turned around and saw the hole completely closing up, concealing the outside view.

The spiritual energy within the barrier was indeed abundant, even more than the most concentrated spots in a spiritual array. Turning around to face the front, both of them hesitated for a moment. There was an underlying sense of unease, and an inexplicable feeling of regret for entering.

They exchanged puzzled glances and realized they both felt the same way.

‘Could it be that we had unwittingly opened Pandora’s box?’ Yan Ge pondered silently.

They surveyed their surroundings and saw gleaming white bones on the ground, along with various spiritually imbued weapons. Frowning, they noticed that the bones were all in a seated position against the walls, with only a few collapsing due to age and lying on the ground. Almost every skeleton was accompanied by two or three spiritual weapons, many of which were storage tools. There were no signs of combat so based on this

scene, it seemed as if these people had been sitting quietly, waiting for death. The situation was truly bizarre.

“Xiao Ge, look over there.” Huangfu Yuchen pointed ahead.

Yan Ge followed his direction and saw a black, half-human-sized cross held in the hands of a seated skeleton.

His heart leaped with joy as he walked over quickly. He was walking over when he felt a strong heat wave coming from his left side and he looked over curiously.

Huangfu Yuchen raised his hand, causing the cross to levitate. After enveloping it in his true qi, he stored it in his storage ring. “Let’s go and see what’s causing the heat.”

The two walked over swiftly and saw a gaping rift in the ground. The crevice was extremely large, almost a thousand miles wide at its widest point. Inside the rift, crimson magma surged and flowed at ground level. If it weren’t for a sealing formation blocking the rift, containing the magma and partially isolating the temperature, they wouldn’t have been able to approach so closely!

At this point, they realized why the projection was protecting the barrier here. And also why all those who entered didn’t break out again.

Imagine, if the barrier broke and the magma flooded the sea, it would undoubtedly cause a massive tsunami. If the magma erupted outward, the situation would be even worse, potentially submerging all cities on land.

The two exchanged stunned glances.

Thinking quickly, Yan Ge said, “Let’s use spirit stones to reinforce this formation and then leave immediately.”

Huangfu Yuchen nodded. While he didn’t have much attachment to Earth, he couldn’t stand by knowing that so many lives would be lost.

The two promptly took out a large quantity of spirit stones. Although they didn't understand the nature of the previous sealing formation, they could duplicate it by finding the locations of the unfamiliar formation's spirit stones. Fortunately, their powerful spiritual sense made the process smooth.

Even so, it took them three days.

Once the formation was completed, the oppressive atmosphere within the cave noticeably lessened.

Both sighed in relief, collected the various spiritual weapons from the ground, and finally removed the outer layer of the barrier to exit.

The creatures had already been killed by the man. He stood there silently, unmoving, without any intention of attacking Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

The two were puzzled but didn't actively provoke him. After reinforcing the outer barrier, they entered the vortex and left.

Descending was easier, as they moved with the current. Going up was a struggle against the current. They needed to use seventy percent of their strength to establish a barrier that could withstand the water pressure, and ascended slowly.

As their heads emerged above the sea, they once again saw the sunlight. Both felt a sense of time having passed as if in a dream.

Huangfu Yuchen hugged his beloved's neck and planted a firm kiss on his wet lips.

Yan Ge held onto his waist, deepening the kiss. After the kiss, they felt reassured.

The two then teleported back to their country. Within seconds, they appeared in the living room of their home.

Huangfu Yuchen asked, "Baby, should we first try to make a fake cross?"

“Not yet.” Yan Ge took out a small dart-shaped object he had got from the underwater cave and handed it to Huangfu Yuchen, asking mysteriously, “Do you know what this is?”

Huangfu Yuchen examined it closely. “This is a tracking talisman.” Since the system store had been fully transferred to Yan Ge’s ownership, the two had purchased various materials related to cultivation, so he recognized the object immediately.

“Not bad,” Yan Ge grinned mischievously.

Huangfu Yuchen also smiles, “We secretly placed a tracking talisman on the cross. So it won’t matter if we give the cross to William. Even if he tries to escape using secret techniques, we’ll still be able to locate him.”

“Exactly.” Yan Ge thought about how satisfying it would be to have William in their grasp, “Let’s call him now.”

Huangfu Yuchen took out Yan Ge’s phone and dialed the number from last time.

Yan Ge picked up the cross and attached the tracking talisman. As soon as the talisman made contact with the cross, it disappeared like a snowflake in water. This was the remarkable feature of the tracking talisman—regardless of the object, once the talisman was attached, it infiltrated like a virus. Few things could resist it.

“William, let’s meet.” Huangfu Yuchen said directly.

William’s skeptical voice came through, “You… found the cross?”

“Isn’t this what you wanted?” Huangfu Yuchen said deliberately.

“That’s right.” William gave the time and location for the meeting and hung up.

Half an hour later, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen appeared on a desolate mountain.

After confirming that there was nothing unusual around, the two landed.

In no time, a familiar energy gradually approached.

William arrived with two people. Those two people were indeed He Xin and Xu Kai. Both of them were motionless, and William held one in each hand like he was carrying chicks.

Yan Ge quickly scanned Xu Kai and He Xin's bodies with his spiritual sense, and breathed a sigh of relief after confirming that they were only unconscious.

William looked at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen with complex eyes.

According to the information passed down by the Holy See, Bermuda was a mysterious region with many treasures that were beneficial for cultivation. However, it was also a dangerous area. In the past, there were cultivators who had gone in, but none of them returned alive. Sending Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen there to find the Heaven-slaying Cross was a brilliant scheme. If they found the cross, and with Xu Kai and He Xin in his hands, he would surely obtain the cross. If they couldn't find the cross, entering such a perilous area would mean certain death, quenching the resentment in his heart.

He thought this way, but never expected that Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen would actually find the Heaven-slaying Cross.

Yan Ge held the cross behind his back and raised it, "This is what you want. Release Xu Kai and He Xin immediately."

William smiled faintly and said leisurely, "How do I know if the cross is real? You give me the cross first. Once I confirm that the cross is real, I'll release them immediately."

As he spoke, he deliberately used his index finger to trace back and forth on Xu Kai's neck.

Yan Ge frowned but didn’t say anything. He inserted the cross into the ground, and William was curious.

Huangfu Yuchen condensed his true qi into a football-sized energy sphere in his right hand and struck the cross.

The energy sphere collided with the cross, causing a brilliant white light to surge from the cross. With a “boom,” the energy sphere shattered.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen’s hair was blown back as they took a few steps back.

A fanatical and excited light flashed in William’s eyes. “Toss it over immediately.”

Yan Ge sneered, “Release Xu Kai and He Xin first. Otherwise, how can I know if you’ll keep your promise once you have the cross?”

“If I release them, how do I know you’ll give me the cross?” William also sneered.

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Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge pondered for a moment.

“How about this? You release one person first. After I give you the cross, you release the other person,” Yan Ge suggested.

William furrowed his brow. He felt that there was some scheme involved, but the cross was of great significance to those who cultivated holy power. He was reluctant to give it up. At this moment, the grudges and humiliations he had suffered from the two seemed insignificant. The cross held a much greater meaning to him.

Then a thought crossed his mind: What if Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen cared for only one of the two captives? Otherwise, why would Yan Ge suggest releasing one. However, the information he had gathered couldn’t possibly be false. He knew that He Yan Ge cared little for his family and cared most about a few good friends. He Xin and Xu Kai were two of them.

Thinking that he could use his escape technique once more, William nodded. “Fine.” He then lifted Xu Kai and tossed him over.

Huangfu Yuchen raised his hand and used his true qi to support Xu Kai, placing him on the ground.

Xu Kai remained unconscious, completely unaware of the ordeal he had experienced over the past few days.

Yan Ge threw the cross over.

William’s eyes lit up with joy as he flew into the air and caught the cross. He glanced at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen before tossing He Xin over. At the same time, he seemed to disappear, becoming invisible. Although he

had considered crushing He Xin to vent his hatred, he feared that doing so would make Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen pursue him in anger. Considering their formidable strength, he decided to release He Xin.

Yan Ge caught He Xin.

Huangfu Yuchen leaped into the air, took a few steps, and with a forceful strike of his right palm, a figure appeared in the air. The figure plummeted from the sky and crashed straight down to the ground.

William was bleeding from his seven orifices. He twitched a couple of times, kicked his legs twice, and ceased to breathe.

Huangfu Yuchen retrieved the cross and stowed it in his storage ring. This object could not fall into the hands of the Holy See. Afterward, he summoned the Threefold Fiery Flames to incinerate William completely.

The two lifted He Xin and Xu Kai, returned to the outskirts of the capital city, then retrieved a cross-country vehicle from Yan Ge's space.

Yan Ge placed his palms on He Xin's and Xu Kai's lower abdomen and infused a small amount of true qi into them to help their weakened bodies recover. He Xin and Xu Kai were both ordinary people, so he didn't dare infuse too much energy.

The two quickly regained consciousness and looked up at the blue sky with confusion. Then they saw Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen and quickly sat up.

"What's going on? Why am I here?" He Xin looked confused. He had been unconscious for too long, and his brain couldn't turn around for a while. He stared at Yan Yan blankly, unable to remember what happened before.

Xu Kai looked around in bewilderment, then touched his stomach. "Yan Ge, what's going on? I'm so hungry…"

"Me too," He Xin chimed in and their stomachs growled in response. At this point, they were starting to wake up, gazing at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen with a mix of bewilderment and curiosity.

Yan Ge chuckled, feeling both amused and guilty. This time, He Xin and Xu Kai had suffered unnecessarily due to him and Huangfu Yuchen. William had likely kept them alive to make sure they didn't die, but he probably hadn't provided them with food or water.

He patted both of them on the shoulder. "It's a long story. All in all, you two got caught up in our mess. Let's go, I'll take you to eat. We'll talk after we've had our meal."

Due to their trust in Yan Ge, neither He Xin nor Xu Kai raised any objections.

The group got into the car, and Huangfu Yuchen took the wheel. Yan Ge retrieved two loaves of bread from the compartment and handed them to He Xin and Xu Kai. "Fill your stomachs with these for now."

The two were indeed famished. They didn't have time to ask about the situation yet; they needed to eat first.

Yan Ge also handed them each a bottle of water.

After finishing the bread and drinking most of the water, Xu Kai and He Xin finally began to recover.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had deliberately landed not far from the farm, so they arrived at the farm shortly after.

The group entered a private room, and Yan Ge instructed Xu Kai and He Xin to order food. Then, he made calls to the Xu and He families to let them know they were back.

Xu Kai and He Xin were both intelligent individuals. Hearing how he had come up with the excuse of the "Mysterious Travel Group," they knew that whatever had happened to them was definitely not trivial. Filled with curiosity and an inexplicable excitement, they felt that something incredible might be about to occur.

Yan Ge ended the call, smiled at the somewhat uneasy duo, and took a seat next to Huangfu Yuchen. “Both of you haven’t eaten for several days. Normally, you shouldn’t indulge too much during your first meal, but I have some pills with me, so you can eat without worries. Just tell me whatever you want to eat.”

“Yan Ge, what’s really going on?” Xu Kai asked curiously.

Huangfu Yuchen patted Yan Ge’s shoulder. “Since they’re not hungry, let’s discuss the matter at hand.”

“We’re hungry, but even more curious,” He Xin said as he picked up two large peaches from the fruit platter and tossed one to Xu Kai.

Xu Kai nodded and took a big bite without any concern for manners. “Let’s start with some fruit. The main dishes will take a while to arrive.”

Yan Ge shrugged and explained the reason for the situation, and revealed their identities as cultivators.

Both Xu Kai and He Xin were trustworthy individuals.

“So, the two of you got caught up in this mess entirely because of me and Yuchen. I’m sorry, brothers. Luckily, both of them are fine. Otherwise, I might have had to make amends through drastic measures.”

“Cultivators really exist!” He Xin’s eyes widened in shock, his expression stunned. The peach he had been eating slipped from his hand onto his leg and then rolled onto the ground.

Xu Kai fared even worse, choking on a piece of peach. He coughed violently, realizing that Yan Ge had scheduled the conversation after the meal to prevent them from choking to death.

Huangfu Yuchen slapped Xu Kai’s back, helping the piece of peach move down his throat.

Xu Kai and He Xin stared at him and Yan Ge with wide eyes, forgetting about their peaches. “So, you two must have achieved a high level of

cultivation now. Can you fly?”

Yan Ge nodded.

“Really? Yan Ge, take your brother for a flight!” Xu Kai exclaimed excitedly as he stood up.

Huangfu Yuchen was speechless, and shook his head. Seeing that Xu Kai and He Xin held no intention of blaming Yan Ge, he felt relieved. He picked up the teapot and poured them both a cup of tea in a rare gesture.

Yan Ge glanced at Xu Kai helplessly. “Let’s talk about that later. Both of you were implicated this time and Yuchen and I feel guilty. So, let me ask you, are you interested in cultivation? We have a set of techniques we can pass on to both of you. However, the spiritual energy on Earth is becoming scarcer. Even if you have talent, your future cultivation won’t be particularly high. Of course, once you succeed in cultivation, living two or three hundred years won’t be a problem. If you’re not interested in cultivation, we’ll give each of you a pendant. These pendants are engraved with protective formations so wearing them will shield you from fatal accidents three times.” The “three times” was already a lot and Yan Ge didn’t dare to give Xu Kai and He Xin something too valuable as holding a precious treasure could be a burden. If Xu Kai and He Xin couldn’t protect the pendants adequately and someone discovered their unique effects, it might bring disaster.

Xu Kai and He Xin’s emotions had calmed down slightly but on hearing Yan Ge’s words, they became excited again. Their minds were in a jumble, seeming to think of many things and nothing at the same time.

“You can think about it slowly,” Huangfu Yuchen said, “but these techniques can only be passed on to both of you.” Earth’s cultivation forces weren’t as singular as those in Great Han. Passing on the techniques to too many people could easily lead to trouble.

Yan Ge’s hand found its way beneath the table to grasp Huangfu Yuchen’s. Huangfu Yuchen’s consideration really warmed his heart.

At this moment, the waiter brought in the dishes.

Yan Ge patted Xu Kai's shoulder. "Let's focus on eating first."

Though Xu Kai and He Xin weren't in the mood to eat, their empty stomachs spoke otherwise. They picked at their food unconsciously while lost in thought. While this recent ordeal was because of Yan Ge, the three of them had been brothers for many years, and since no one was harmed, Xu Kai and He Xin didn't blame him. However, they understood that Yan Ge must be feeling incredibly guilty, and even if they declined his compensation, he would surely find another way to make up for it. Furthermore, it was undeniable that both of these choices were intriguing.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen didn't interrupt their contemplation. They ate their meal attentively, engaging in light conversation.

By the time they finished their food, Xu Kai and He Xin had only managed to eat half of their rice bowls and remained deeply absorbed in thought.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen refrained from rushing them. Fresh fruit was brought in, and the two of them moved to the nearby sofa, turned on the TV, and lowered the volume.

After about ten minutes, Xu Kai was the first to break the silence, asking a question, "Can this jade pendant only be worn by one person?"

He Xin looked at Yan Ge too.

Yan Ge was momentarily taken aback, then responded, "It can be worn by different individuals."

A sense of relief and delight spread across Xu Kai's face. "I want the jade pendant. I'll have my son wear it for a year, then my wife for a year, and they'll take turns…" With that, he nudged the stool's leg closer to the table with his foot, scooped some vegetables into his bowl, and began to eat heartily.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen exchanged a glance, unsurprised by his choice. Xu Kai had many connections to the non cultivator world, and even if he embarked on the path of cultivation, he couldn't fully devote himself or make significant progress. He was a clever man.

The confusion in He Xin's eyes faded away, replaced by relief. He smiled slightly at Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, and made up his mind, "I want the jade pendant too."

With He Xin and Xu Kai readjusting their mindsets, the odd atmosphere in the private room returned to normal.

The four of them engaged in relaxed conversation about other topics, and concluded the meal—whether it could be considered lunch or dinner—on a cheerful note.

Huangfu Yuchen took two identical jade pendants from his storage ring and handed them to Xu Kai and He Xin.

"They're so beautiful, obviously high-quality items," Xu Kai praised as he stroked the jade pendant. He also expressed gratitude.

"Are they exac the same?" He Xin compared the two pendants. "What if someone misunderstands and thinks that my little princess is betrothed to Xu Kai's notorious demon king? What then?"

Yan Ge burst into laughter, collapsing onto Huangfu Yuchen's shoulder. "Hahaha… You really do think a lot!"

Xu Kai shot He Xin a fierce glare. "How can my son not be good enough for your daughter?"

He Xin ignored him and turned to Huangfu Yuchen. "Can you change the appearance of the jade pendant?"

"Sure." Huangfu Yuchen fought back a smile as he took the jade pendant. He infused a trace of spiritual energy into it, and the patterns on the pendant changed in shape and color.

He Xin finally revealed a satisfied expression and carefully placed it in his pocket. “Thank you.”

Xu Kai was fuming. From the corner of his eye, he saw some soup left in a dish. He discreetly pressed his palm into it and then casually patted He Xin’s back. A greasy light-red handprint appeared on He Xin’s gray-white vest. “I’ll bring my son to your house tomorrow.”

He Xin remained composed. “I’ll have my wife take our little princess to her grandmother’s house tomorrow.”

Xu Kai chuckled without saying much, discreetly wiping his hands under the table.

He Xin was puzzled, but didn’t think much of it.

As the two bid their farewells, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen looked at the handprint on He Xin’s clothes and barely contained their amusement.

Xu Kai smirked, turned his head, and wagged his finger at the two before striding ahead confidently.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen escorted them out of the restaurant, then paused, not wanting to be subjected to the same teasing as He Xin.

He Xin was quite perceptive. Seeing Xu Kai chuckling continuously and people passing by giving him odd looks, he suddenly understood. He chased after Xu Kai to beat him up and Xu Kai took off running.

MCUS Chapter 244

Outside the capital of Great Han, an inconspicuous rift appeared in the silent blue sky. From this rift emerged two figures, one in white and one in black, floating gently.

Yan Ge landed gracefully flicked his long hair casually. He traced an arc in the air and commented, “Hmm, the air here is indeed more comfortable.”

Naturally, the handsome man beside him was Huangfu Yuchen. With his left hand on Yan Ge’s waist and his right hand holding a folding fan, he opened it with a snap. “Baby, let’s bring Bai Guan and Yunyi out first. We’re too close to the road, and there are people coming and going. We should leave quickly.”

*Bai Guan and Yunyi are their horses.

“Alright.” Yan Ge took the fan from him and fanned himself lightly. With a wave of his hand, the two majestic horses that had been kept in his space appeared out of thin air.

Huangfu Yuchen tapped his forehead and mounted his horse. “Let’s go.”

Yan Ge leaped onto his horse and gently clamped its sides. Bai Guan ran as steadily as a flying bird, racing along the cement road and heading into the city.

Yunyi quickly caught up and rode alongside it, matching its pace.

With the sound of hooves, the two spirited horses reached the city gate swiftly. Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen pulled on the reins, slowing the horses down and entered the gate at a leisurely pace.

The guards at the city gate marveled at the familiarity of these two horses. When they saw the figures on top, they were stunned and quickly knelt down. “Your Majesty The Retired Emperor, Your Highness the Grand Empress Dowager!”

***Retired Emperor is a title for the father of the reigning emperor. Empress Dowager is the title given the wife/ widow of the retired emperor/previous emperor.**

Huangfu Yuchen’s lips twitched. Wasn’t “Retired Emperor” the term used to address the old man?

Yan Ge almost choked on saliva but immediately shielded his face with the fan. “Grand Empress Dowager”… what a harsh title!

Huangfu Yuchen suddenly felt a sense of balance and a smile tugged at the corner of his lips. He swiftly moved his hand and snatched the fan back from Yan Ge.

The passing commoners heard the guards’ words and turned their heads. So it was indeed true. They quickly moved to the sides of the road, allowing Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen to pass. They bowed respectfully and shouted in unison, “We humbly welcome the return of His Majesty the Retired Emperor and His Highness The Empress Dowager to the capital…”

“Rise.” Huangfu Yuchen had no choice but to speak.

Yan Ge lightly flicked the reins, prompting Bai Guan to move ahead. With the road clear and bystanders on both sides, there was no risk of injuring anyone.

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled and followed suit.

As the commoners rose to their feet, they once again looked at the figures of the Emperor and Empress who led them toward prosperity and strength, and were filled with excitement. They soon gathered in groups, whispering softly. Most of their conversations revolved around the glorious achievements of the Emperor and Empress from a few years ago, joy and contentment painted their faces.

Inside the palace, Huangfu Yunxi was overjoyed when he received the news and was personally welcomed them.

Yan Ge was eager to see his family, but their return caused quite a stir. It might attract unfavorable gossip if they didn't visit the palace first. So, he joined Huangfu Yuchen and returned to the palace. He cursed himself for being too excited and forgetting to disguise himself.

The flow of time was different between the two worlds. While they had spent half a year on Earth, nearly four years had passed in Great Han.

Huangfu Yunxi, dressed in imperial robes, was visibly moved upon seeing Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. He knelt respectfully, his head knocking the ground as he greeted, "Yunxi pays respects to Father Emperor and Second Master."

The almost twenty year old Huangfu Yunxi bore an increasing resemblance to Huangfu Yuchen, not only in appearance but also in demeanor and style. Those who saw him praised his resemblance to his father.

"Rise." Huangfu Yuchen helped him up, looking him up and down before nodding in satisfaction. "Not bad. I'm relieved to have entrust Great Han to you."

“Thank you, Father Emperor, for your affirmation. Yunxi won’t disappoint your expectations.” Huangfu Yunxi felt a weight lifted on receiving his father’s approval.

The three of them took their seats in the hall.

Huangfu Yunxi asked with concern, “I wonder if everything has been well during the years Father Emperor and Second Master were away?”

Yan Ge smiled, “We’re doing well. We just missed you all, so we came back to visit.”

Huangfu Yunxi exclaimed happily, “Second Master, since you and Father Emperor have rarely returned, please stay for a while.”

Seeing him occasionally glance at Huangfu Yuchen, it was evident that he wanted to spend more time with his father. Perhaps he also had some state affairs to seek advice on. Yan Ge nodded in agreement, “We’ll stay for about five or six days this time.” Huangfu Yunxi had ascended to the throne, and it wouldn’t be good for Huangfu Yuchen to stay in the capital for too long.

Huangfu Yunxi understood this reasoning and was moved by the consideration shown by his father and Second Master. However, he knew they valued their freedom so he didn’t want to push it.

While Huangfu Yunxi and Huangfu Yuchen discussed matters, Yan Ge strolled around. The two of them spent half a day in the palace.

After having lunch at the palace, they headed to the Yan Mansion together.

Huangfu Yunxi had made thorough preparations and sent word to the Yan family in advance.

From the oldest to the youngest, the entire Yan family eagerly waited at the entrance. When they saw the two elegant figures on horseback approaching, they rushed forward in excitement.

“Father, Mother, Elder Brother!” Yan Ge waved from a distance, a beaming smile on his face.

Yan Ge’s elder brother, Yan Su, sighed inwardly. He realized that his younger brother was no ordinary person. His cheerful smile alone could lift anyone’s mood. He glanced at his father, who looked like he was holding back but didn’t that his beard had already started to curl up.

“Your Majesty The Retired Emperor, Your Highness The Empress Dowager __”

As always, Huangfu Yuchen waved them off from the formalities. Yan Ge automatically blocked out the titles he didn’t want to hear. He walked up to the group and embraced each of them.

“Father, Mother, Elder Brother.”

“Don’t be unruly,” Yan Xiaojing reprimanded lightly, his eyes showing that he was clearly pleased.

Madam Yan couldn’t hide her amusement as she glanced at him openly, clearly mocking him. She let out a hearty laugh as she wiped her tears with her handkerchief.

“Second Uncle.” The handsome boy by Yan Su’s side greeted Yan Ge with a cheerful smile.

“You still remember me?” Yan Ge was pleasantly surprised. He picked Yan Xiangtian up and put him on Bai Guan’s back.

“I remember. Father said that you used to carry me when I was little.” Yan Xiangtian was young, but he had an air of maturity about him.

Yan Ge chuckled, “When you were little? Aren’t you still little now?”

Yan Xiangtian also laughed, his bright and clear eyes brimming with liveliness.

“Hehe, let’s chat inside.” Yan Ge led his horse with one hand and held Huangfu Yuchen’s hand with the other, winking at him.

A hint of a smile passed through Huangfu Yuchen’s eyes.

Yan Su nodded silently. The relationship between the two was still as strong as ever, which was good to see.

After settling in the main hall and enjoying tea and fruit brought by the maids, the servants were dismissed, and the family chatted merrily together.

Yan Ge shared a few interesting stories, making them burst into laughter. The worries and concerns of being separated for so long were gradually eased.

Finally, Yan Ge brought up the main topic, “Father, Yuchen and I returned this time because we want to take you all to another time and space for a visit.”

Madam Yan and Yan Su’s wife exchanged surprised glances. A journey to another time and space? They hadn’t even dared to think about such a thing.

Yan Su and Yan Xiangtian were both intrigued. Yan Su was still young and adventurous by nature, while Yan Xiangtian was curious about everything new due to his age.

“Second Uncle, I want to go!” Yan Xiangtian immediately exclaimed.

Yan Xiaojing was also intrigued. He wasn’t very old and opportunities to meet his second son would become increasingly scarce. Naturally, he wished to spend more time with him. Since his second son wanted to go and the other timeline was presumably not dangerous, why not give it a try?

Huangfu Yuchen said, “The other time and space is worth a visit. As for matters in the court, you can discuss them with Yunxi.”

Yan Ge was somewhat surprised, “You don’t intend to take Yunxi with us?”

Huangfu Yuchen held his hand and shook his head, conveying a message through their voice transmission. “Many of the accomplishments there are too incredible and might easily sway people’s hearts. Yunxi is an emperor, and experiencing too many extraordinary things isn’t necessarily a good thing for him.”

Yan Ge carefully pondered, realizing that it was indeed a valid point. An emperor’s perspective on issues differed from that of ordinary people. The cultural gap between Earth and Great Han was vast, and it would undoubtedly have a profound impact on an emperor. With even a slight misstep, it might lead to confusion or even obsession.

He nodded in agreement with Huangfu Yuchen.

So, the matter was settled.

Next, Yan Su and Yan Xiaojing went to hand over their responsibilities. Huangfu Yuchen stayed with Huangfu Yunxi for a few days, while Yan Ge stayed with his family.

With Huangfu Yunxi’s support as the emperor, the transition of responsibilities proceeded smoothly.

Five days later, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had Yan Su, Yan Xiaojing, Lady Wen, Madam Yan, and Yan Xiangtian change into Earth-style clothing, then they activated the temporal passage and returned to Earth.

On Earth, only a little over a day had passed.

The group appeared near Fengshan Farm.

Both Yan Su and Yan Xiangtian were cultivators so they immediately sensed the abundant spiritual energy of the farm.

Huangfu Yuchen introduced, “That’s our property, Fengshan Farm. Since you’re still unfamiliar with this world and to avoid being recognized as outsiders, you’ll need to keep a low profile for the first couple of days.”

He knew his beloved didn’t like lying to his parents, so he spoke up on his behalf. The true reason was to prevent Yan Xiaojing and his wife from discovering that Yan Ge had another set of parents here.

Yan Ge patted his waist without looking at him and chuckled as he communicated through voice transmission, “I’ll thank you properly tonight.”

Huangfu Yuchen smiled, a meaningful glint in his eyes. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Yan Xiaojing nodded in agreement. “Certainly.” To make sure Madam Yan, Lady Wen, and Yan Xiangtian understood as well, he carefully explained the situation to them.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen then led them into the farm. They booked a private room and ordered a table full of delicious dishes, along with various fruits and drinks, all introduced by Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

Throughout the meal, the expressions of astonishment and amazement on the faces of the group never faded.

After finishing the meal, Yan Ge said, “Mom, Dad, you can rest well today. Watch some TV and movies, experience the accommodations here. Tomorrow, we’ll take Tiantian to the amusement park for fun. The day after tomorrow, we’ll teach you how to use computers. And the day after that… Well, we’ve got each day planned out for you to enjoy fully.”

The excitement was evident on the faces of the Yan family as they listened.

Suppressing their excitement, they followed Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen back to their home. The rooms there were more than enough for them.

In the living room, Yan Xiaojing and the others watched TV. Yan Xiangtian couldn’t sit still and tugged at Yan Ge, wanting to explore the farm.

Yan Ge subtly gestured at Huangfu Yuchen.

Yan Xiangtian paused for a moment, then ran over and tugged at Huangfu Yuchen with a smile, “Uncle-in-law, let’s go together.”

Huangfu Yuchen chuckled and gave Yan Ge a sidelong look before nodding. “Okay.”

Yan Ge’s lips twitched, and he pretended to clean his ear. “Tiantian, what did you call out just now? I didn’t quite hear it.”

Tiantian’s voice rang out clearly, “Uncle-in-law!” The young boy’s voice was crisp and loud.

Yan Xiaojing and the others couldn’t help but laugh.

“You little brat,” Yan Ge chuckled, pretending to chase Tiantian.

Tiantian sprinted to the door, but unfortunately, he didn’t know how to open it. Yan Ge caught up to him and raised his hand as if to spank him.

Huangfu Yuchen intervened, “Tiantian didn’t get it wrong.” With that, he grabbed Tiantian’s hand and headed outside.

Tiantian was overjoyed and shouted again, “That’s right!”

Yan Ge followed them outside, feeling somewhat exasperated.

MCUS Chapter 245

The next day dawned with clear skies, and Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen drove the whole family to the amusement park.

It was the first time Lady Wen rode in a car, and she felt a bit nervous. Yan Su discreetly held her hand and Lady Wen blushed. But when she saw couples holding hands on the sidewalk, her nervousness eased a bit. Gathering her courage, she held Yan Su's hand back.

Yan Su looked ahead with a smile in his eyes.

Yan Xiaojing seemed lost in thought, gazing at the asphalt road.

Yan Ge's heart skipped a beat. His father must have noticed the connection between the asphalt and concrete roads here.

Sure enough, Yan Xiaojing spoke up, "Xiao Ge, the roads here seem similar to the ones in Great Han…"

Huangfu Yuchen, who was driving with one hand, patted Yan Ge's thigh reassuringly and took the lead in the conversation. "Not just the roads, but many things here resemble what Xiao Ge's master taught him. In fact, both Xiao Ge and I speculate that his master might be from this world."

Yan Xiaojing didn't doubt his words. If Yan Ge could travel through time and space, then his master certainly could as well.

"I see."

Yan Ge scratched his chin, realizing how convenient it was to have a "master." He hoped Yan Xiaojing wouldn't have any more questions, as he really didn't want to lie to him.

It seemed that Yan Xiaojing heard his unspoken plea, as he didn't ask any more questions and instead looked out the window with the same curious expression as Yan Xiangtian.

Yan Ge introduced each sight to them one by one. Even if Yan Xiaojing had questions, he didn't give him a chance to ask.

Yan Xiaojing didn't plan to ask any more questions. Yan Ge had told him that a day here is almost four days in Great Han. He and Yan Su had only taken a two-month leave in Great Han, which meant they could only stay on Earth for half a month. With so much novelty and amusement on Earth, it was better to ask less and observe more.

"Master, look, what's that?" Madam Yan eagerly pulled Yan Xiaojing's sleeve and pointed at the sky.

Yan Ge smiled. "Mother, that's an airplane, a type of airborne transportation. If you're interested, both Yuchen and I can arrange for you to take a flight."

Yan Xiaojing waved his hand. "I'm afraid it won't fly as smoothly as you and… Yuchen's flying techniques. Let's skip it. Just looking at other fascinating things already keeps us quite occupied."

Both Yan Su and Lady Wen nodded in agreement.

Seeing their good spirits, a smile curled on Yan Ge's lips.

"Second Uncle, I want to ride an airplane." Yan Xiangtian whispered to Yan Ge.

Yan Ge readily agreed, "We can do that after we reach the amusement park."

Soon, the car parked at the entrance of the amusement park.

Having booked tickets in advance, they didn't have to queue up like other visitors and they went in directly.

Yan Ge handed Yan Xiangtian a brochure and introduced the amusement park's attractions and architectural features: skydiving, high-altitude flights, musical fountains, water screen movies, pirate ships, interstellar cars, bumper cars, and more.

Yan Xiangtian was so excited that he immediately dragged him forward.

Huangfu Yuchen and the others followed a little more slowly. Huangfu Yuchen introduced the various attractions and architecture to the rest along the way.

The Yan family felt like their eyes weren't enough to take it all in.

After Yan Xiangtian had played for awhile, the group walked toward the amusement park's fast-food restaurant.

Both Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Su carried several large bags, all filled with toys, souvenirs, drinks, and snacks purchased along the way.

Although Yan Ge was empty-handed, this morning wasn't any less busy for him than it was for Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Su. He took plenty of photos of the family with his camera.

Lady Wen was initially shy but gradually became more at ease, and enjoyed herself.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen didn't notice that not far away, Yan Jiaqiang was leading his illegitimate son, Yan Lu, forward.

"Ge'er, can I try it?" Madam Yan was quite interested in the camera and reached out to ask Yan Ge for it.

Yan Ge readily showed her how to use it. "Press here to take a photo."

"Got it." Madam Yan smiled and held the camera. She wanted to take a landscape photo to see how it turned out. She adjusted her distance, moving back a few steps while aiming the camera at the restaurant entrance. However, she suddenly felt something underfoot.

Shortly after, she was harshly shoved and almost fell but was caught by Lady Wen just in time. At the same time, she heard a sharp female voice exclaim, “Are you blind?”

Madam Yan frowned. She had been worried about stepping on or bumping into someone, so she had purposely looked behind to ensure no one was there before stepping back.

Although Lady Wen was gentle, she wasn’t timid. She immediately retorted, “Are you turning black into white? It’s clear that you bumped into my mother.”

Yan Ge had turned to converse with Yan Xiangtian when he heard the commotion and turned back.

Du Rulan!

Huangfu Yuchen had quick eyes and quick hands, and immediately took out a mask bought by Yan Xiangtian from the bag and put it on his face.

Yan Ge had the same reaction as him and quickly pulled out a mask and placed it on his face.

Both of them let out a sigh of relief at the same time, grateful that Yan Xiangtian had bought masks for everyone.

Yan Su was originally annoyed when he saw his mother being scolded, but when he accidentally saw the two doing the exact same thing at the same time, he couldn’t help but want to laugh.

He quickly walked back to Madam Yan’s side. “Mother, are you okay?”

Madam Yan shook her head.

Du Rulan took off her sunglasses and stared coldly at her.

When Du Rulan found out about Yan Jiaqiang’s affair, he immediately proposed divorce, but Du Rulan strongly objected. They had numerous arguments, and Yan Jiaqiang refused to sever his relationship with the other

woman. Du Rulan was furious and spent her days plotting to break up Yan Jiaqiang and his mistress.

Today, when she saw Yan Jiaqiang bringing his illegitimate son to the amusement park and doting on the child, she couldn't help but think of how Yan Jiaqiang used to dote on Yan Yan when he was little. She also thought about how Yan Jiaqiang was now cold towards both Yan Yan and herself and it ignited a fire of resentment within her. And then someone stepped on that spark.

The woman who turned around appeared quite young. Her skin was fair and smooth, as delicate as a peeled boiled egg. The sense of injustice in Du Rulan's heart intensified. She lifted her chin, walked up to the woman with an air of authority and scolded, "Do you know how to walk? Can't you watch where you're going?"

Yan Ge and Yan Su both frowned.

Madam Yan waved at both of them dismissively and smiled, "It's true I don't have eyes behind my back. I can't see what's happening behind me. But you, your eyes seem rather big but it turns out they're just for show."

Yan Xiaojing chuckled dryly. His wife was not someone to be trifled with.

Huangfu Yuchen's gaze held a hint of curiosity. He never knew Madam Yan had this side to her.

There were quite a few onlookers nearby. As soon as they heard Madam Yan's words, they understood the situation and burst into laughter.

Du Rulan had never been so humiliated before and couldn't control her anger.

Yan Ge held Madam Yan's arm, comforting her, "Mother, don't be angry."

Yan Su's eyes flashed as a cunning thought came to mind. He held Madam Yan's other arm and spoke gently, "Mother, getting angry ages you faster."

Yan Xiangtian was quite clever and guessed his father’s intentions. He immediately pounced into Madam Yan’s embrace, “Grandma, don’t be angry. You’re so young at fifty. If you don’t get angry, you’ll still be young at a hundred!”

The onlookers watched Madam Yan in astonishment, filled with envy. She indeed took good care of herself, she looked no older than thirty!

Upon hearing that the other woman was around her age but looked so youthful, Du Rulan felt even more jealous. She glanced at Madam Yan’s clothes, which were clearly not from any luxury brand, and a scornful expression crossed her face. “You idiot, you dirtied my shoes and even hurt my foot. And you dare to say you’re in the right? Do you know how much these shoes cost? You couldn’t afford to compensate me even if I sold you!”

Yan Ge’s face darkened.

Madam Yan continued to hold onto him, preventing him from speaking. Her smile grew more pronounced, her tone still casual. “Oh, really? I don’t think you’re more of even a million. Ge’er, didn’t you receive a message on your phone yesterday?”

“Yes, right here.” Yan Ge took out the message from his phone and handed it to her.

Madam Yan raised the phone to Du Rulan’s face and, for the benefit of the two onlookers, showed them as well. “See this? It’s a balance reminder message from 95588 that my son received yesterday. There’s over twenty million in my son’s bank account. But even if I threw away this twenty million, it wouldn’t cover the cost of your shoes. Because, you see, with your quality, no amount of dressing up can hide the ugliness in your heart.”

***95588 is the customer service hotline number for the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China.**

Laughter erupted from the crowd and Yan Su strained to hold back a smile.

Du Rulan was trembling with rage. “You, you… bitch!”

She lunged forward, aiming to slap Madam Yan’s face.

Madam Yan remained calm and caught her wrist, pushing her away. She had never trained but had seen her son and grandson practice. Coupled with the fact that Yan Ge gave her everything to maintain her body well, she had strength greater than an average person and reflexes faster than most.

Du Rulan stumbled back. Her feet were unsteady and she ended up sitting on the ground, bumping into a child behind her.

The ice cream in the child’s hand slipped from his grasp and landed squarely on Du Rulan’s face.

“Hahaha…” The onlookers laughed even louder.

Du Rulan seethed with anger and frustration, her face turning beet red. “Damn it, all of you should die!”

“Ge’er, Xu’er, let’s go,” Madam Yan shook her head, linking her arms with her two sons, and left with her head held high.

Yan Ge glanced back at Du Rulan, his heart calm and unaffected. There’s nothing to pity about someone like her. If Du Rulan had tried to reflect on herself in the past, how could she have ended up like this?

Huangfu Yuchen had no sympathy for Du Rulan either. Xiao Ge had not changed his voice when he was speaking, If she had paid him some attention in the past, she would have immediately recognized her son’s voice. He leaned on his lover’s shoulder, signaling him to look ahead, “Tiantian must be hungry.”

Yan Xiangtian waved at Yan Ge from the restaurant’s entrance, “Second Uncle, hurry up!”

“Coming.” Yan Ge smiled slightly and quickened his pace.

MCUS Chapter 246

Du Rulan returned to an ordinary apartment building, her thoughts filled with recent events. She cried, cursed, and smashed things while making her way through and the living room was strewn with shards of porcelain and glassware.

“Mom! Are you done throwing a tantrum?” Yan Yan heard the commotion from his room, walked out briskly, and saw the chaotic state of the living room with annoyance.

He envied Yan Weifeng, who had become financially independent and moved out already.

Du Rulan suddenly turned around, looking at Yan Yan in shock. Her voice was furious, “What? Are you going to criticize me too? I’m your mother!”

Yan Yan couldn’t bear it any longer and shouted, “What’s the point of throwing a fit at home? If you’re so capable, confront Yin Huiru, confront the Yan Jiaqiang!”

Du Rulan’s anger surged and her body suddenly felt weak. She steadied herself by leaning against the sofa with one hand, slowly sat down and looked at Yan Yan with disbelief. “What… did you just say?”

“Isn’t it the truth?” Yan Yan walked over, kicked aside a cushion, and towered above her. “If you had any capability, things wouldn’t have escalated like this. Do you know how many people at school mock me? I don’t want to waste my breath on you. Just look at yourself.” Yan Yan furrowed his brows, turned, and started heading back to his room.

Du Rulan was trembling with anger.

“Stop right there!” She scolded loudly, but her voice was weak, which undermined her authority.

Yan Yan halted his steps, turned around, and looked at her with indifference. “What is it now?”

Du Rulan struggled to control her anger. “Yan Yan, I’m your mother. How can you talk to me like this?”

“I’d rather not have a useless mother like you.” Yan Yan said and left without even looking back.

Du Rulan felt like she was struck by lightning.

—”I’d rather not have a useless mother like you….”

—”I’d rather not have a useless mother like you…”

—”I’d rather not have a useless mother like you…”

This phrase echoed incessantly in her mind. She sat on the couch, dazed. Was this the son she had cherished since childhood? Was this the sole result of all her efforts? No, she wouldn’t accept it! She had to stand up again!

Suddenly remembering the recent series of financial transactions in her bank account, she quickly retrieved her phone. Her hands trembled, and it took her a moment to steady them. She dialed a number swiftly.

“Yan Ge.”

The voice on the other end sounded surprised. “What’s wrong?”

“You give me 10,000 yuan every month. I want you to give me all the money I’m to receive until I’m a hundred years old at once.”

Du Rulan had already calculated the figures in her mind. She was now fifty-two years old and had forty-eight years left until a hundred. With 120,000 yuan from Yan Ge each year, that would total over five million yuan. It

would be enough for her to turn her life around. By then, she would see if Yan Jiaqiang and Yan Yan would dare to treat her with that attitude!

“Impossible.” Yan Ge rejected her bluntly. “I’ve already entrusted this matter to a lawyer. There’s no room for negotiation. They will transfer ten thousand yuan to your account every month. That’s it.”

The call was swiftly disconnected. Du Rulan gritted her teeth and clenched her fist. She thought about throwing her phone, but realizing she’d have to spend more money to replace it if it broke, she reluctantly placed it on the couch.

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After dropping Yan Jiaqiang off at the door, Yin Huiru gently kissed his cheek. “Drive safely.”

“Don’t worry.” Yan Jiaqiang pecked her lips with satisfaction. Ever since he announced his bankruptcy, he had moved in here to live with Yin Huiru. Though the home was much smaller than before, it was cozy, and the three of them lived happily. This was the life he wanted.

Yin Huiru stood by the window, watching the black car gradually move away. She smiled slightly, picked up her phone, and dialed a number with familiarity.

On the other end, a young and calm voice answered, “Ruru, how did things go?”

“He gave me his last one million yesterday. He said I would manage the household from now on,” Yin Huiru’s eyes sparkled even brighter when she smiled, radiating charm.

“That’s great! So, now we’ve managed to get over nine million from him,” the man on the other end laughed contentedly. “He probably doesn’t have much left to squeeze. Take our son and I’ll come pick you up.”

“Okay, see you later. Drive safely.” Yin Huiru lifted her child who was sleeping peacefully, grabbed a small handbag, and left quietly, not even bothering to close the door.

A gust of wind blew, leaving the door wide open…

Half a month later, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen sent the Yan family back to Great Han and then returned to Earth.

Upon their return, they heard the landline ringing in the living room.

“Who’s this?” Yan Ge reclined lazily on the sofa, answering the call with his foot. Both he and Huangfu Yuchen could sense that their realm was about to break through again and they would soon be entering seclusion. He listened to the call absentmindedly.

Huangfu Yuchen cast him an amused glance and sent his spiritual sense into his storage ring, trying to figure out what things needed to be arranged as soon as possible before he and Xiao Ge went into seclusion.

“Mr. Yan, this is Wang Zhiyuan. Sorry to disturb you. I’ve been trying to call you and Mr. Huangfu for a while.”

As soon as Yan Ge heard Wang Zhiyuan’s voice, he handed the phone to Huangfu Yuchen.

Their phones were stored in their storage rings when not in use, so they couldn’t receive signals.

“Do you need something?” Huangfu Yuchen asked in his usual calm tone.

Wang Zhiyuan replied, “Mr. Huangfu, as we discussed last time, the Holy See needs an intimidating event—”

Huangfu Yuchen interrupted him, “We’ll take action when the time comes. If you’re impatient, you can find someone else.” He then ended the call without paying attention to the other person’s reaction.

In the offices of the Shadow Operatives, Wang Zhiyuan's face darkened. Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen hadn't hidden their movements as they traveled with several unfamiliar people. Due to the Shadow Operatives' special status, there was hardly anyone in the nation whose background they couldn't uncover. But the backgrounds of those five individuals remained entirely elusive. This made him suspicious: had those five people appeared out of thin air?

Thinking of this possibility, his palms grew sweaty. What if Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen did possess the ability to tear through space and time? It would mean their cultivation had reached an unbelievable height.

This terrifying speculation left him restless. He had threatened such powerful people with the state machine—and now he found himself biting off more than he could chew. He sighed bitterly. Unfortunately, there's no regret medicine in this world.

Across from him, Zhang Youze and Liu Xianglong sighed quietly.

***They are the two old men Huangfu Yuchen met and discussed Fengshan Farm. Huangfu Yuchen and Yan Ge banned them and Wang Zhiyuan from benefiting from the farm after Wang Zhiyuan threatened them.**

"Should we go and meet them ourselves?" Zhang Youze asked in a low voice.

Liu Xianglong shook his head, "We've completely offended Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. Even if we went to beg them, we'd just be humiliating ourselves. Sigh…"

…….

Yan Ge lay on the couch with his eyes closed, as if he had fallen asleep.

Huangfu Yuchen patted his butt, the wonderful touch making him linger for a while. He gave it a light squeeze and said, “Baby, you rest. I’m going to talk to He Xin, Guo Jian and Guo Yi about the upcoming matters.”

“I’m going too.” Yan Ge sat up. Now wasn’t the time to relax.

Once they got out of seclusion, they could proceed with their plan to travel abroad.

They split up—Yan Ge went to find He Xin, while Huangfu Yuchen sought out Guo Jian and Guo Yi.

After arriving at He Xin’s office door, Yan Ge knocked.

“Come in.”

“Are you busy?” Yan Ge looked at the person who was writing at his desk.

On seeing him, He Xin stood up suddenly, almost knocking the office chair over. He was both pleasantly surprised and excited. “Yan Ge, you’re back! I’ve been trying to call you and Huangfu Yuchen, but couldn’t get through.”

“Did you need something?” Yan Ge took out his phone from his storage ring. He saw 24 missed calls—1 from Xu Kai and 5 from He Xin. The remaining 18 were from Wang Zhiyuan. He couldn’t help but scoff internally. Did Wang Zhiyuan fear they’d run away?

He Xin walked over a few steps, guiding Yan Ge to sit on the sofa and pouring him a cup of tea. “Brother, I really don’t know what to say.”

Yan Ge saw the reddening rims of He Xin’s eyes. He felt puzzled and patted his shoulder with concern, “What’s wrong?”

He Xin quickly calmed down and took a seat beside him. “Because Yueyue is still young, she’s always with Miaomiao, so the jade pendant you gave

me is currently worn by Miaomiao. The day before yesterday, Yueyue insisted on eating chicken wings, so Miaomiao took her out to buy some. However, they were hit by a drunk driver who ran a red light… Thanks to the jade pendant you gave them, they both came out of it without a scratch."

Yan Ge listened and sighed, "It's fortunate that they're both fine. Don't overthink it. Surviving a disaster brings future blessings."

"Yeah," He Xin's mood improved significantly. "Brother, thank you."

"You call me 'brother,' so why be polite? Yan Ge then got to the point. "I'm here to let you know that Yuchen and I are about to enter seclusion. The affairs of the farm will be in your hands."

He Xin nodded with a smile. "You can rest assured."

"Why are you smiling?" Yan Ge didn't understand.

He Xin chuckled, "I'm smiling about Xu Kai. Last time I met him, he was still clamoring for you and Huangfu Yuchen to take him flying. Once you're in seclusion, he won't have a chance to find you."

Yan Ge grinned wickedly. "Taking him on a flight isn't impossible. However, let's make him wait a little longer."

After briefing He Xin about the affairs of the farm, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen entered seclusion within the space.

When they emerged from seclusion, a year had passed.

After spending two months traveling around the world, they entered seclusion once more. When they emerged again, their cultivation had reached the late stage of Tribulation Crossing.

Some time later, the heavens and earth bestowed a special resonance upon them, and their Heavenly Tribulation was set to arrive in one month.

By this time, they had been on Earth for exactly four years.

As agreed, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen handed Fengshan Farm to the Shadow Operatives.

When Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen scavenged the spiritual weapons from the seabed, they had selected those they would need during their Tribulation Crossing. They gifted the rest to cultivators who had good aptitude and character.

Guo Jian and Guo Yi reaped the most rewards. Having followed Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen for a long time, they were already convinced of their capabilities. Now, knowing that the two would soon face their Tribulation, they were both happy and reluctant to part, mixed with a healthy dose of envy. However, both believed they would have their own opportunities in the future.

With the exception of Wang Zhiyuan, the entire Shadow Operatives team benefited. Moreover, they also received spiritual stones from Huangfu Yuchen.

Not long after, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen received a message from Ji Chang—Wang Zhiyuan had been expelled from the Shadow Operatives.

Before crossing the tribulation, they returned to the Great Han to visit their families. After spending almost a month with their loved ones, they arrived in Country Y and prepared for their tribulation.

They had no intention of harming innocent people, so they chose a desolate mountain area for this. Once everything was prepared, they sat cross-legged.

The clear sky gradually turned dim, as the dense clouds overhead descended closer to the ground, growing darker. Layers of dark clouds piled upon one another, resembling turbulent black waves surging over. They rolled and roiled like an avalanche from a tall mountain or like thousands of troops charging. Eventually, they hovered about five kilometers above the ground.

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The members of the Holy See in Country Y noticed the disturbances and were greatly alarmed. Who was undergoing Tribulation? Without much thought, they hurriedly flew towards the source of the pressure.

Within the borders of China, those with higher-cultivations also sensed this pressure. Their hearts stirred, and they soared through the air like meteors, heading in the direction of Country Y.

Beneath the dark clouds, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen's long hair and robes were fluttering wildly, yet they remained motionless as pine trees. The array they had set up long ago isolated the pressure for them.

Amidst the black clouds, thunderous rumblings suddenly echoed one after another. Lightning flashed within the clouds, with flashes of light appearing and disappearing, resembling a serpent of electricity slithering through the sky, poised to strike.

"Boom—" There was another thunderclap. The wind grew stronger and fiercer, causing the distant trees to dance wildly in the wind. Amidst the darkness, they resembled waves rising and falling.

"Boom!"

"Boom!"

Lightning danced in the sky, and flashes of light shot down from the gaps in the layers of black clouds, as though countless silver blades were slicing through the black canvas of the sky.

Looking up, it seemed as if the heavens were about to collapse.

“Baby,” Huangfu Yuchen held Yan Ge’s hand, advising him with concern, “Although the Tribulation will double since we have to survive the catastrophe together, our preparations are thorough, we just have to remain steady.”

“Don’t worry. We will ascend smoothly.” Yan Ge smiled at him, calm and confident.

Huangfu Yuchen gazed into his eyes, his voice gentle and affectionate, “Yes, no one and nothing can separate us.”

The catastrophe continued to brew, and the thunder claps were louder than the last. The force of Heaven’s Dao focused on Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, the torrential waves stood in stark contrast to other places, almost as if it had sealed off the vast space where Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen stood.

“Yuchen, it seems like the Nine-Nine Heavenly Tribulation.” Yan Ge looked up at the thunderclouds overhead, his tone unworried. Thanks to the existence of the system store, he had acquired notes on crossing the Tribulation from senior cultivators. He knew that the Heavenly Tribulation encountered by each cultivator was unique. The so-called Nine-Nine Heavenly Tribulation consisted of nine thunderstorms. Cultivation itself was going against the natural order, which led to the existence of the Heavenly Tribulation. The deeper one’s comprehension of the Dao, the more complete their state of mind and strength, the more they defied the natural order. The heavens responded more forcefully to such cultivators, and therefore, the punishment was more severe, leading to a more powerful Heavenly Tribulation.

“What does it matter?” Huangfu Yuchen was confident in both himself and Yan Ge’s strength. Faced with such pressure, his will to fight was ignited.

“Exactly! What does it matter!” Yan Ge’s spirit surged; he had waited for this day during all his years of cultivation. What was there to fear now? It was time to take the plunge!

Several foreigners suddenly appeared about four to five miles away. Seeing the two figures below the Tribulation Clouds, they were both amazed and envious.

“Aren’t those people from China? From what I know, there hasn’t been anyone from China who has undergone the Tribulation for hundreds of years. Who are those two?”

Another person whispered, “I reckon they must be the ones who killed William and Wei Wen.”

The third person grinned mischievously, “William was practically the Pope’s right-hand man. Killing him is equivalent to slapping the Pope’s face. Surprisingly, the Pope didn’t retaliate. Can we assume that the Pope also considered himself no match for them?”

“Jack!” the person next to him scolded him sharply, “How can you say such things? Have you lost the will to live?”

Jack shrugged, “I’m just stating the facts, nothing more.”

At this moment, several shooting stars streaked from the east.

The people from China had arrived.

Jack and the others gave them a brief glance before losing interest and retracting their gaze. They were more interested in the Heavenly Tribulation. Perhaps one day, they might reach the same height in their cultivation, so today was an opportunity to learn from experience.

Yuan Luoheng, Guo Jian, Guo Yi, Liu Yuandao, Zhang Youze, and a dozen others landed quietly, looking at the two figures beneath the Tribulation Clouds.

“It’s really Senior Yan and Senior Huangfu!” Ji Chang exclaimed in shock and horror. These two seniors had already reached the Tribulation Crossing stage. So, when Old Wang had threatened them with the state machine, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen didn’t kill him only because they didn’t care to.

Yuan Luoheng, Zhang Youze, Liu Yuandao, and others were inexplicably filled with emotions. For so many years, no one in China had reached the Tribulation Crossing stage, and today, two appeared at once. Perhaps Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen didn't have much sense of belonging to China, but to them, these two would forever be people of China, their pride.

"I hope both of them can cross the Tribulation smoothly," Liu Yuandao said sincerely.

"They definitely can!" Guo Jian was very confident in Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

Ji Chang and the others echoed his sentiment.

"Boom—" There was a furious roar from the heavens, and a lightning bolt tore through the darkness, as though splitting the sky in two. The scene resembled the impending arrival of doomsday. It was both shocking and horrifying, and the onlookers involuntarily retreated two or three miles.

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen stood up, their gentle gazes suddenly becoming razor-sharp, their breaths held as they stared upward.

"It's here!"

"Boom—"

The Heavenly Thunder was like a dragon, rushing down toward Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen's heads.

However, Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen remained unmoving.

Ji Chang couldn't help but sweat for them, anxiously saying, "Why aren't they moving yet? If they don't prepare in time, it'll be too late!"

The Heavenly Thunder crashed madly, seeking to obliterate Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen. About fifty meters away from them, a transparent, glass-like dome appeared above their heads, shielding them. The dome wasn't large, only able to accommodate about four or five people standing.

“It’s an array!” Yuan Luoheng chuckled, berating himself for being overly nervous. Of course Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had made thorough preparations before daring to undergo the Tribulation.

The Heavenly Thunder struck the protective barrier formed by the array. The barrier only trembled slightly, like a gust of wind passing by.

“What an impressive array!” Liu Xianglong exclaimed, once again regretting not stopping Wang Zhiyuan earlier. They could have used some clever means to bring Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen onto their side. Perhaps they would have taught them the method to set up this array.

He and Zhang Youze exchanged a glance, both with a deep sense of regret.

Neither of them noticed that Wang Zhiyuan was present, and he was feeling just as regretful. In retrospect, it was all his short-sightedness. The reason he had threatened Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen back then was mainly due to the vast difference in strength between cultivators from Country Y and those from China. The threat posed by Country Y cultivators was too great. He wanted to settle it once and for all, at least reducing the pressure on China for a hundred years. Additionally, he knew that Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen possessed profound cultivation. However, he never expected that their cultivation had reached the Tribulation Crossing stage. If he had known earlier, he definitely wouldn’t have taken that step. Unfortunately, there were no regrets pills in the world.

The second Heavenly Thunder descended, but the barrier remained intact.

The third Heavenly Thunder descended, and the barrier shattered with a loud “crack”.

The overwhelming pressure from the sky immediately pressed down onto Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen, it felt like Mount Tai descending on them. The area where the two stood caused the grass and tree branches to be flattened against the ground, immobilized.

“Boom—”

The fourth Heavenly Thunder was coming!

Yan Ge leaped into the air, fearlessly facing the Heavenly Thunder. His sharp eyes were illuminated by the lightning, and his majestic fighting spirit surged toward the sky.

Yuan Luoheng frowned, “Both seniors gifted so many spiritual weapons to others. It’s evident that they have plenty of usable artifacts on hand. Why not use these artifacts to resist a few Heavenly Thunder bolts before taking them on directly?”

Liu Yuandao and Gong Zhicheng were also puzzled, and they looked at Liu Xianglong for answers.

Liu Xianglong also had a puzzled expression.

In the blink of an eye, the fourth Heavenly Thunder plummeted toward Yan Ge. With no time for further discussion, the observers’ gazes refocused on the white-clad figures beneath the Tribulation Clouds.

However, they remained unaware that each successive Heavenly Thunder was stronger than the last. Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen had already discussed their approach: first, they would use the array’s protective barrier to test the Heavenly Thunder’s power, then they would personally confront the Heavenly Thunder, and finally, they would use spiritual artifacts to resist the Heavenly Thunder. This was the most effective method.

With a loud shout, Yan Ge infused sixty percent of his true qi into the spiritual sword. Like the force of creation, it slashed at the lightning bolt as thick as an arm.

There was a massive and deafening “boom”.

Around a dining table in an apartment in the capital, Du Rulan, Yan Jiaqiang, and Yan Yan were eating in silence. Suddenly, the jade pendants hanging from Yan Yan and Yan Jiaqiang’s necks emitted a soft white light. Within the light, a dynamic light curtain appeared.

“Mom, what’s that!” Yan Yan exclaimed in surprise.

Du Rulan was equally startled and quickly took off her jade pendant. Inadvertently, she caught sight of the figure confronting lightning. It looked exactly like Yan Ge!

Du Rulan was greatly shocked. What was going on? Yan Ge had given her this pendant, saying it’s for protection. She and Yan Jiaqiang each had one. The orange color of the pendant seemed ordinary, so she hadn’t paid much attention to it. But with a hint of suspicion, she had visited a jade shop to inquire about it. The jade expert had informed her that the pendant was worth at least two million or more. Only then did she decide to wear it around her neck.

Yan Jiaqiang wore a surprised expression as he stared at the image that had appeared on his jade pendant. He then suddenly remembered something he hadn’t paid much attention to before.

“Rulan…”

Du Rulan glanced at him coldly, and ignored him.

Yan Jiaqiang awkwardly cleared his throat, realizing that he was currently a guest under someone else’s roof and had to bear with it. “Do you remember when Father fell seriously ill before? Later, he invited an expert who cured him. At the time, Father accidentally mentioned the word ‘cultivator’?”

Du Rulan stood up abruptly, exclaiming in disbelief, “Are you saying Yan Ge is a cultivator?”

Yan Jiaqiang nodded, feeling that many strange things he had noticed before now made sense.

“The jade pendant seems to suggest that Yan Ge is undergoing a tribulation —”

“Impossible!” Yan Yan slammed the table, his voice high-pitched, but his gaze involuntarily flickered toward the pendants on Du Rulan and Yan Ge.

That damned Yan Ge, why hadn’t he given him a pendant? He was his younger brother! Intense jealousy surged, and he couldn’t tell if he was jealous of Yan Ge or of Du Rulan and Yan Jiaqiang.

“Hahaha! My son is a cultivator!” Du Rulan joyfully rushed towards the door, “I’m going to find him now!”

Yan Jiaqiang paused and quickly followed.

Yan Yan gritted his teeth and followed closely behind.

…

Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen were unaware of what was happening at Du Rulan’s home in the capital.

Yan Ge had promised to save Du Rulan and Yan Jiaqiang once when their lives were in danger. However, he and Huangfu Yuchen had to undergo the tribulation sooner than expected. So, he had given each of them a pendant and also given one to his other friends Lu Hanya and Yang Zhou.

The pendants of Du Rulan and Yan Ge, like those of He Xin and the rest, provided protection, but unlike those ones, the ones Yan Jiaqiang and Du Rulan had could only be used once.

Perhaps because Yan Ge had personally given the pendants, or perhaps the heavens wanted Du Rulan and Yan Ge to live with regret, the pendants unexpectedly displayed the scene of Yan Ge facing the tribulation. However, regardless of what Du Rulan and Yan Jiaqiang were plotting, they were bound to be disappointed.

Yan Ge successfully dispersed the fourth tribulation thunder.

The fifth tribulation thunder roared like an enraged beast, descending from the horizon.

Huangfu Yuchen burst into laughter. He soared into the sky and his spiritual sword emitting a silver light that resembled an enormous axe, slashing at the tribulation thunder.

After Huangfu Yuchen landed, he exchanged a relieved glance with Yan Ge, concentrating on awaiting the next tribulation thunder.

“Boom—”

Both of them raised their spiritual swords high, soaring into the sky with an earth-shattering shout. They released their swords simultaneously. The tribulation thunder seemed to be frightened by their ferocious momentum as it dissipated instantly.

The seventh one was similarly resolved by the two.

The eighth!

A black umbrella appeared in Yan Ge’s hand and flew to cover his and Huangfu Yuchen’s heads with a swift motion. The umbrella shattered, dispersing the thunder.

The ninth!

A shield-shaped lightning shield flew out of Huangfu Yuchen’s hand like a lightning bolt, once again resolving the tribulation thunder.

“It’s done!” Ji Chang couldn’t help but exclaim excitedly.

The dark clouds in the sky gradually dispersed, and countless streams of golden light descended from the sky, gently enveloping Yan Ge and Huangfu Yuchen.

The two exchanged a glance, burst into hearty laughter. They tightly embraced each other, slowly rising amidst the gentle golden light.

Regardless of the future, they would be together forever.

——[End of the Story]——

( ) I can’t believe we are done with Male Consort Upgrade System!! To be honest, novels set in ancient times are not a piece of cake, 😅 not to mention the cultivation terms.

Anyway, thank you for reading till the end!!

You can go check out my other ongoing novel “I Rely On Acting Well-behaved To Marry First, Then Fall In Love“.